



The Simple Path to Online Teaching Excellence

Teaching Beyond the Podium Podcast

00:06 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Hello, my name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey and welcome to the teaching beyond the podium podcast series. This podcast is hosted by the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Florida. And our guests share their best tips, strategies, innovations and stories about teaching. Today's guest is Nikki Lyons from the Center for Teaching Excellence. And she's going to share with us some tips, on course reviews for excellent online teaching. In the course of her studies, Nikki had some great online learning experiences with instructors who really focused on student needs and creating great learning opportunities that challenged students while guiding them towards success.

00:50 Nikki Lyons

So when I was pursuing my early childhood masters, I had to take some online courses. And a couple of those courses were great. Like I got into the class, the instructor had all of the information laid out, we knew what we were expected to do. And then I had some, well, I had one particular experience that wasn't the best. Essentially, the instructor put the textbook assignments online, we didn't have the textbook for the first I think four weeks of the semester, it was a lot of just read and respond, there was no interaction with any of my classmates, I didn't really get to interact with the content. And so the course itself just didn't feel engaging. And then also, as a teaching assistant, I had to teach a couple of online courses. And my supervising instructors gave me the opportunity to make design choices and instructional choices based on what I felt like my students would want and need. And that just kind of piqued my interest into realizing that I could give engaging instruction in an online format. And not just in the classroom.

02:05 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

I asked Nikki, what makes an online course exceptional? And according to Nikki, instructor, presence is key. It's at the heart of an engaging course, especially when the instructor shows that they care deeply about students' success.

02:21 Nikki Lyons

As a student, I would say the ideal online course is going to be engaging, it's going to be informative, it's going to be organized. And at the end of the semester, I'm going to feel like

taking this course was worth my time. And I've grown from it. As a designer, I just add a little more meat to the sandwich. So thinking through the design and development of a course, educational background says you begin with the end in mind, think about where it is you want your students to be once they've completed your course and then build from there. So a solid course is going to have learning goals or objectives, updated content and learning materials that are relevant to the topic that's being taught. It's going to give students plenty of opportunities to engage with their peers and also with the instructor team. My best learning experiences have been when I felt like the instructor was just as invested in my learning as I was and that I as a student mattered.

03:31 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Nikki got to work very closely with instructors as they developed their learning experiences to accommodate for social distancing. One great example she shared was from the College of Veterinary Medicine.

03:45 Nikki Lyons

So this particular course is for students who are in veterinary medicine. And they have to get experienced with equine examination and with the form of the animal, and that's going to require some hands on experience. However, because of social distancing, all of the students who are enrolled in the class can't go to the farm where these particular horses live at the same time. So the instructors built out a schedule that allows some students to go to the facility on one week, and then other students to attend on the opposite week. But they tossed in this interesting feature of students having to do virtual examinations. So they put the students into teams and half of the team would go to see the horses in person, and then the other half would have to help them conduct the examination virtually. So this was teaching them how to ask questions that they may not have considered before and how to guide their peers through finding those answers.

05:02 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Nikki has worked tirelessly with the Center for Teaching Excellence, and numerous faculty volunteers at UF to develop the UF plus Quality Matters rubric and this rubric can help guide and continuously ameliorate the quality of any online course.

05:19 Nikki Lyons

Specifically here at UF, we use the UF plus Quality Matters rubric. This is a tool that we've created based on the Quality Matters rubric that's used nationally for evaluating course quality, as far as course design, and now in their most recent version, online instruction. And we've taken the sixth edition of the Quality Matters rubric, and combined it with the UF standards of excellence in teaching. And we've created a rubric that really fits the way that we deliver online

instruction here at the university. And I think that it plays a vital role in helping us examine a course is quality because it can be used at every stage of course is life cycle.

06:13 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Nikki, the Center for Teaching Excellence, and faculty worked to add the UF standards to the rubric used for course reviews. Now the UF items in the rubric allow the rubric to address teaching and delivery of online courses that respect the individuality of all instructors regardless of the courses they teach.

06:34 Nikki Lyons

The Quality Matters rubric focuses very much on the way a course is designed and constructed to ensure that students are being exposed to content in a way that's going to help them master the goals that are set before them. But we wanted to also highlight the ways that instructors choose to teach the content because you can give one online course to two instructors, and they can deliver it in different ways. So we want to give instructors the opportunity to highlight the ways that they choose to deliver instruction to their students.

07:14 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

The rubric is not a tool to be tucked away and saved for later or used only once a course is designed. It can actually serve instructors as a guide along the path to designing and building great online courses. From the very inception or idea of a course, the rubric can help instructors meet and exceed quality actions as a course develops.

07:38 Nikki Lyons

When an instructor or their department - their unit - thinks of a topic that they need to present to students. It's often let's think about what it is we want to give them and how we want to do that. I think that is a critical period of incorporating the UF plus Quality Matters rubric, because you can already know what will be expected from that course if we're going to say this is a quality course this is a high quality course this is an exemplary course, it ties back to the adage of beginning with the end in mind. So as you're designing your course, you thinking through all of the concepts that you're going to include, you can start looking at how these instructional practices align with the UF plus Quality Matters rubric. Because alignment is central to that rubric.

08:33 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

The rubric is also flexible in that at its foundation, the rubric developers understood that there are multiple paths to achieving any one given course objective. In addition, some specific

standards may not be acceptable or preferable in some courses. Therefore, flexibility is essential allowing courses to reflect the individuality of the instructor while still meeting the students' needs.

09:00 Nikki Lyons

Every specific review standard does not have to be applicable to every course. The rubric is broad enough and general enough that it can be applied to courses across a variety of disciplines. So a course that's in the social sciences, a STEM course, both of them can use this rubric to evaluate the quality of the course. In instances where a specific standard may not apply to a course, for example, if we're looking at a synchronous online course, the instructor might not provide an introductory welcome video. Instead, they may choose to welcome their students during synchronous class sessions and use that as an opportunity to engage with them and let their students know who they are. Whereas in an asynchronous course, an instructor may choose to incorporate an introductory video and then perhaps videos throughout the semester. Where they're letting them know who they are as a person and as an instructor. So for that reason, we give those instructors the opportunity to say, well guess what, this particular standard's not applicable to my course because I choose to make this my way of expressing who I am and how I, how I teach. So we don't want to use the rubric as a way of boxing instructors into one specific way of teaching. That's that's not our goal at all. If anything, we just want to use it as a standard measurement to ensure that everyone is providing quality learning experiences.

10:41 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

The pathways process is pretty simple and easy to follow. Nikki explains the first four steps of the process.

10:50 Nikki Lyons

The first thing I would suggest you do is talk to your unit's instructional designers - and that's if you have one. Because they're all familiar with the rubric and how you can use it to build a strong course. If you don't have an ID team in your unit, we have instructional design units on campus. So we have the Center for Online Innovation and Production, we have the Center for Instructional Technology and Training, and they have solid teams who can give you the level of guidance you need for your course.

11:25 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Nikki then recommends taking the course reviews for excellence workshop or CREW training to get familiar with the rubric process and reviews.

11:34 Nikki Lyons

The next step would be to take the UF plus QM crew course also known as course reviews for excellent workshop, which covers the same information as Quality Matters training, but does it in a way that's more specific to the review process here at UF and is more cost effective. And also, if you have any questions, you can feel free to reach out to me to schedule a time to talk about the review process.

12:03 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Step three is all about your course self review.

12:07 Nikki Lyons

So once you've done a little bit of that preliminary work, create an account in our review tool known as proposal space. And in there, this is where you will start your self review as the instructional leader for this online course. So you'll get the opportunity to go through each of the specific review standards, and I like to say, highlight the shining examples of each standard in your course. No one knows your course like you do.

12:38 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Once your self review is completed, your course will be assigned to reviewers so they can provide the most helpful feedback.

12:46 Nikki Lyons

Once you've completed yourself review and attached materials like your your course map that demonstrates alignment, your student evaluations from a previously taught semester so that we can see how your students interacted with the course, then you'll be able to submit your course for review. At that point, we'll gather a review team for you that's composed of faculty at the University who may be within your field - so content matter experts. Faculty members who may not be as familiar with your particular subject area, but are familiar with the teaching practices that you may employ, possibly instructional designers who are very familiar with course design. And they can go in and start doing the peer review for you and giving you feedback for improvement. And also giving you feedback on those practices that they see that are exceptional and highlight some of the great ways that we're teaching at UF.

13:45 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

The feedback you receive will guide your next and final step in the pathways process.

13:51 Nikki Lyons

As a part of the review cycle, once your team has finished looking at the course, using the rubric, we'll then give that feedback to you. So that you can make improvement to your course so that you can see the things that you're doing well and might want to incorporate in other courses that you teach and then respond to their feedback because sometimes there may be standards that aren't quite met yet, or ones that may be met, but the reviewers just couldn't find it within your course. And so we give you the opportunity to respond to go back and make adjustments because this process is about improvement and continuous growth and improvement. So we don't want it just to be a one and done review where we say yes, this is great, you hit the mark or no, sorry. We want everyone to be able to take their courses to that next level.

14:45 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

We developed a course review process that's really intended to be friendly, collaborative and time efficient. Self reviews may seem a little overwhelming at first, but Nikki explains that accommodations have been made for convenience, ease of use, and time constraints.

15:01 Nikki Lyons

At first glance, it can seem time consuming. And all of us have plates that are full. So it's like, why would I want to voluntarily put one more thing on my plate. But we've structured the process in a way that you don't have to commit more time than you have available at the moment. Right now, as instructors opt into completing course reviews, you get to work through yourself review at your own pace, we don't put a specific time limit on that. So if you get started at the beginning of the semester, and then have to take a break for midterms, take that break for midterms, and then come back and continue working through yourself review until you're ready to submit. And that same thing goes for serving as a peer reviewer. So when putting together a review team, I try to make sure that I'm very conscious of when instructors are available to conduct reviews.

16:00 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Many instructors have shared the benefits they found in going through this course review process. Nikki shares some of that positive feedback.

16:08 Nikki Lyons

Some of our instructors have said that participating in the review process has opened their eyes to instructional processes they may not have thought about before. And so they're beginning to think about ways to incorporate those ideas into their own courses. And then also, some

instructors are realizing that their peers want to know more about how they're teaching and what they're doing. And so it gives them the opportunity to share with their peers. We've also received feedback that sometimes there are tools that instructors may forget about. And it's like, you know what I'm over here working harder than I had to because there's already a tool that does this for me.

16:54 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

The Center for Teaching Excellence pathways process and rubric are meant to be the supports to create great online learning experiences. Nikki shares a story of a dramatic course transformation through some very simple steps.

17:08 Nikki Lyons

This instructor came to our team. And one of the things he'd noticed was that in some of his feedback from his students, they would be confused about the way that his course was structured, they just couldn't find materials, or in some cases, they couldn't figure out what they were supposed to do each week. And looking at it, I could see that there were definitely some areas of improvement. This instructor was using the files section of his course to house all of his materials. But he wasn't naming the files in a in a logical way. And essentially, all of the materials for every week were all lumped together. He didn't really have a course structure. So our team showed him how to use modules and pages to organize his course content, and present it to students in a way that allows them to see the natural progression of the course. Whereas in the past, he was using an Excel spreadsheet, and listing out everything that was supposed to be happening at each of those weeks, and so students would get in and not exactly understand what what they needed to accomplish each week or when assignments were due. And so they were missing some of those due dates. So we helped him to create a a structure for his course, we helped him to organize his materials within the Files section of the course. And then we also asked him to incorporate a midterm survey in the course so that he would also be able to find out if there were things working for his students, that he could continue in the second half of the semester, and things that weren't working so that we could possibly help him make adjustments so that the students would have success in those areas. And as a result, his his student feedback was much better after that semester.

19:08 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

These kinds of changes can seem small at times, but they can really transform a student's world and learning experience. The ability to have such an impact on students is truly remarkable, especially when you realize this can be done easily and really honestly from a kitchen table.

19:26 Nikki Lyons

What excites me about online courses and course design is that it gives instructors an opportunity to be really creative, and provide students with a myriad of learning experiences and opportunities that they might not get to experience in their regular day to day lives. I think that online learning opens up the world to folks who may not get to see different aspects of what all the world has to offer. For example, it's possible now for someone to take a field trip to a veterinary office that serves small animals and large animals. And they can do so from their dining room table. And yeah, as a designer, I think that course design itself is just so interesting, because you can take one lesson and provide that content in multiple ways so that all of your students are able to access the information and learn the content in the way that best suits them.

20:39 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Thank you for listening to this episode of the teaching beyond the podium podcast series. For more helpful resources developed by the Center for Teaching Excellence at UF visit our website teach.ufl.edu we're happy you joined us and we hope to see you next time for more tips, strategies and ideas on teaching and learning at the University of Florida.