

APA Teaching Critical Thinking Online Session

What I did:

Asynchronous online.

Used Top Hat platform, and David Manley book, *Reason Better*

Things I thought worked pretty well:

1. About the book & platform:
 - The book's native to the platform, so the integration of text and assignments was really smooth.
 - Especially appreciated the comprehension/engagement/practice questions built right in to the chapters that students could seamlessly do as they were reading.

2. A couple course structure things that I thought worked:

Content-y-structure:

Following the Manley book (that it's structured this way is one reason I picked it), led off with discussion of cognitive biases, framed as ways in which our brains aren't wired to make rationality easy and automatic. Then big motivation for all the informal logic, critical thinking techniques and skills and concepts and methods is that they're tools for thinking carefully and systematically in cases where our automatic and effortless thought processes are liable to lead us astray.

Found that worked really well. Both because it motivates the content of the rest of the course, and also because it's pretty easy to get students engaged with and excited about the cognitive biases stuff, and then you've got the term off to a good start with some momentum, engagement-wise.

Micro-structure:

Structured the course with two modules/week, each one open for about 72 hours.

- Generally, first module each week was a chapter of the text,
- Second was some practice exercises

Sometimes one or both modules also included some supplemental materials – videos I'd make, videos from other places, or additional readings.

As much as possible, opening and closing times of modules were the same every week, and at the beginning of the week I'd post & send email announcement of all the crucial times at which things were happening in the week.

That was all implementation of stuff that I'd read and been told in online teaching trainings about:

- 1) Importance of really clearly communicating to students what they need to do and when

- 2) Importance of maintaining regular engagement with the course, so students don't sort of slide out of touch and go off the rails
- 3) How it's better to have a lot of frequent low-stakes assessments rather than a few big ones

Thought that all worked pretty well, and got positive feedback about those features of the course at the end of the term.

3. *Something else I'm glad I did:*

When I posted videos, either ones I made or ones I got from someplace else (TED talks, Khan Academy, Crash Course philosophy, I always put in a zero-point question, asking students what they found helpful or unhelpful and why.

Response rates weren't super high, but higher than I expected, and feedback was interesting.

So I'd definitely do that again.

Also three things I learned from that that I wouldn't have been confident about otherwise:

1. A few times I gave them a bunch of quite different kinds of supplemental materials on the same subject matter – two different TED talks, a Khan video, a Crash Course video, a video from an AP psych prep youtube series, etc. – and there was really a lot of variance in which things students found helpful or not.
 - My lesson from that: It's good to offer a range of stuff, rather than trying to find the one best thing. My judgments about the one best thing are likely to match up with what works for only a subset of my students.
 - I'll do more of that next time – do more searching around for quite different kinds of materials covering the same ideas.
2. They really liked the videos in which I responded to the questions they'd been asking, things they'd identified as difficult or puzzling. Usually one of the assignments each week would be a "what were you confused about/what didn't you understand" question about the reading, and when I made videos responding to those they got really good responses from students.
 - My lesson from that: Do that more often next time.
3. They really liked the videos where my dog made an appearance.
 - My lesson from that: Include the dog in more videos.
 - Also, maybe, something about production values.
 - Advice I got from the online trainings at Rutgers was to not aim for high production values – in fact maybe to aim for low production values, because less-slick videos do a better job establishing a connection with students. Other people I know at other institutions

have gotten really different advice – curious what other peoples' experiences with this have been like, cuz hesitant to draw a lot of conclusions based on my tiny sample.

Things that I thought didn't work so well or wasn't sure about:

This is something I'm not sure about: I have concerns about platform overload.

- Asymmetry of burden – doesn't cost each instructor much to learn the platform they're going to use. But then if students wind up needing to learn their way around five different LMSs for their five classes, that's a real burden.
- Really mixed feelings about this, curious what others think.

Grading:

- I don't feel like I've got it figured out yet, how to do frequent low-stakes assessments that are pedagogically valuable – they make students genuinely engage with the material in a way that helps them retain and understand – but where the grading load isn't a huge burden.
- Would love to hear about things people have done that work here!

Maintaining engagement & contact, and building community, in asynchronous courses.

- I and my TA held office hours and after a couple weeks, after getting positive response to a poll about it, I introduced an optional discussion section that'd be recorded and posted after. But did not get a lot of takers on either – almost nobody ever came to office hours, and maybe half, maybe a little more than that, nobody came to discussion section. So that didn't really work. Would like to figure out a way to make that, or something like it, work better.
- The way I implemented discussion threads also wasn't especially effective. I had frequent discussion threads without a lot of structure to the assessment – students could do the work by initiating a new thread or responding. What we got was a lot of new threads that didn't get responded to. Did not get it figured out how to do that in an effective genuine-discussion-promoting way. Got some ideas from colleagues about alternatives, but also really interested to hear from people what they've done that's worked.

Something probably most of the people at this session know from their own experience, but:

- I should have started creating my materials way earlier than I did.
- I really underestimated how much prep time I needed to run an asynchronous course, and my experience would have been better, and the course would have been better, if I'd spread that work out over a longer time by doing more of the fine-grained work of creating problem sets, making subject matter videos, etc. before the term started.