

## **Triple Threat or Triple Opportunity: When a Pop Culture Course Goes Online at a Community College**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Teaching popular culture comes with many opportunities and challenges in a traditional classroom, but equally interesting and valuable are the possibilities that teaching such a course online can provide. This article explores how “Popular Culture in the US,” an online course at a community college, embraces some key attributes of the digital world such as multimodal communication and Web 2.0 interactivity. Evolved from a face-to-face community college course, the online version has increasingly developed to move from an instructor-centered to a student-centered approach that relies upon various engagement strategies. By using student choice, OER-enabled pedagogy, and constructivist approaches, the instructor engages students by leveraging the Internet to educate students, empower them as creators of content, and support critical participation in popular culture. The article illustrates how teaching within the online space can enhance teaching and learning, particularly for courses that have a disciplinary focus on popular culture and media.

**Keywords:** pop culture, online course, constructivism, community college, universal design for learning, open pedagogy, open educational resources, interaction, multimodal

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the US, community colleges operate as the popular culture antithesis to elite higher education. Community colleges are presented as functional, open-to-anyone, and indicative of low value, while Ivy leagues are presented, like high culture, through a lens of sophistication, exclusivity, and importance. Thus, community colleges experience a perceived absence of quality, both regarding those learning, and those teaching; indeed, they are for the masses (Barrinton, 2019).

While online courses are increasingly offered in higher education, they too suffer from a negative perception (Columbaro, & Monaghan, 2009; Saad, et al, 2013; Taylor III, 2018). Additionally, non-traditional courses, such as those focusing on aspects of popular culture, are routinely taken to task for not being “real” courses (Allen, 2019; Bathroom Readers Institute, n.d., Crow, 2018).

Therefore, an online course on popular culture at a community college experiences a triple-threat of deficit thinking. Yet, such a situated course offers a meaningful learning experience through constructivist approaches including universal design for learning (UDL), open pedagogy, and multi-channel interaction.

This article explores one such course and how the instructor moved from a traditional face-to-face (F2F) environment into an online course environment. The purpose will be to illustrate the numerous ways that teaching popular culture in an online environment at a community college can enhance learning and critical thinking through practices that can be understood as and connected to constructivism. In doing so, the article will provide examples and approaches to effective online teaching, particularly for a course on or featuring popular culture as well as for diverse student audiences, such as those found at community colleges (National Center of Education Statistics, 2019).

## **WHY ONLINE**

While F2F teaching has been an important part of education, asynchronous learning has also been essential. Written language represents the first asynchronous learning tool that made learning flexible to the reader’s time rather than the teacher’s schedule. Today, digital technologies (images, audio, video, etc.) transform communications by removing time constraints. These technologies offer opportunities in education for a more dynamic, flexibly-paced learning experience for the student who can take as much or as little time to process information rather than be confined to the traditional F2F learning experience. The F2F environment still remains a robust learning space but this course’s online evolution illustrated how complex and dynamic online learning can be when leveraging constructivism and different pedagogical practices, particularly for popular culture-related courses.

Some benefits of online learning are more established than others. For instance, discussion forums can enable a more democratic experience, wherein everyone has a more equal opportunity to share their thoughts (Sorensen & Murchú, 2004; Swan 2018). Students are not racing to collect their thoughts while the instructor and peers wait, nor are they worrying about having to be as fast as some of their class peers (Chen, 2018). In this course, students are not only sharing their personal connections to different areas of pop culture but are also talking about complex and challenging topics such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Discussion forums allow for students to let their guard down and speak more frankly. This opens up more complex conversations around the content and the students’ considerations about challenging topics.

Regularly gathering together in one space takes coordination, energy, and resources. F2F courses can be limiting for some depending upon physical ability, transportation options, and particularly here in New England, weather. At times, students may prioritize course availability online as opposed to prioritizing a format for the best learning experience for themselves (Jaggars, 2014). The construct of class time in one, two, or three hour chunks is equally nebulous for learning in terms of what is most effective for students and

for instructors. For classes that meet two or three times a week, it means chipping away from actual time on learning with some portion of that time going to getting set up, getting started, and winding down. Once-a-week classes that meet for three hours offer challenges in terms of how much attention can be maintained over that period. Each class may also lose time repeating things or further clarifying ideas. Thus, time and energy is used to get to the classroom and the time in the classroom is often limited in how much is actually spent on learning. It is no wonder why instructors find it a challenge to stay on schedule with their syllabi.

Another challenge for F2F courses is navigating the vastness of the course subject. Instructors regularly lament the concepts they cannot get to in a course. With popular culture, this challenge seems even greater given its vastness. Students come into the conversation from different points of reference and often, in order for people to follow the conversation, some time is dedicated to explaining, even briefly, the context of some piece of pop culture. If the instructor introduces Spider-Man, which version of Spider-Man is being discussed? Each clarification (usefully) swallows up class time for people who do not understand the reference but may limit opportunities for deeper discussion. In the online environment, hyperlinking to specific examples contextualizes the pop culture being discussed and creates learning opportunities for those who do not know without sacrificing the time of those who do.

Along those lines, the F2F environment requires the course to be more linear in its approach. If torn over which film to show during class, an instructor can only settle on one. Yet in an online course, the instructor can encourage students to choose among several films. For instance, when discussing the racist portrayal of African Americans in films, the first author would have the students in the F2F class watch *Bamboozled* (2000), but in the online environment, students choose from several satirical films on African American representation including *Bamboozled* (2000), *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (1996), *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987), and *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* (1988). The discussion became more dynamic by covering thirty years of satirical films on African American representation and allowed for students to learn about (and possibly, eventually watch) other films in that vein. In the online course, Eaton increasingly leveraged this possibility by allowing students to select from different learning materials in many weeks, allowing them to focus on learning materials that might speak more to their interests than might be possible in a F2F course.

Instructors can be challenged to explore things that happen midstream in a F2F course. They are torn when course-related news items occur that are ripe for discussion. They wish to include them, but need to sacrifice part of the day's agenda. In the online space, such events can be integrated into announcements (with relevant links) and redirected to a discussion forum for conversations relevant, but not central to the course. These opportunities allow for deeper exploration while not detracting from the learning.

In addition to shifting time, gaining more learning time, providing more democratic engagement, and creating multiple learning paths, online learning can provide the instructor with more effective means of understanding students and their engagement in the course. LMSs account for all time and actions performed within them. Instructors can access this information often in the form of reports that can be class-wide or focused on individuals. While Orwellian and open to potential abuse, this type of knowledge can significantly help the instructor understand where students are spending time, what activities are useful, and what resources may not be accessed (Dixson, 2015). This type of information on how students interact in a course can provide some details that are harder to discern in a F2F course.

## **ONLINE LEARNING AS A CONSTRUCTIVIST ENVIRONMENT**

Online course enrollments continue to grow while enrollments in F2F courses decline (Seaman, et al, 2018). Given the continued growth of online course enrollments, leveraging the affordances of this particular

environment are essential in ensuring that the next-generation of college-going students receive quality educational opportunities. Moving F2F courses into online formats supports a re-envisioning of pedagogy (Neff & Whithaus, 2008) that aligns with constructivist approaches. Simply put, constructivism posits that “knowledge is a function of how the individual creates meaning from his or her experiences” (Jonassen, et al, 1995, p.11). In this way, constructivist educators create opportunities for students to interact with content to create their own knowledge (Jonassen et al., 1995). As the focus of a constructivist pedagogy does not centralize a lecturing professor, online courses and their associated technologies are particularly well-suited for supporting and fostering constructivist pedagogies (Jonassen et al., 1995).

We posit that universal design for learning (UDL), open pedagogy, and online interaction are approaches to constructivism. This paper details these approaches to constructivism as well as particular examples of these approaches. In this particular course, UDL was manifested in this course through multimodality. Open pedagogy was supported with attention to content curation representing breadth and depth. Finally, online interaction allowed for multiple means of engagement through different communication channels and learning activities which supported students in interacting with the instructor, students, and content.

## **COURSE HISTORY**

The course moved online in 2012 after being taught as an Interdisciplinary Studies special topics course on the community college’s urban campus. In the first few years, the course relied on textbooks--a survey and a primary source reader. However, just as conversations about Open Educational Resources (OER) in higher education were increasingly taking place, Eaton shifted away from textbooks (Jelley & Scanlon, 2013; Lee, 2013; Owens, 2013). Inspired by what OER offered in terms of flexibility, Eaton adopted a mix of OER materials and library-sourced materials in Spring 2015. This approach allowed Eaton to rethink the types of learning materials to include more multimedia content.

Changing format and content led to considering new features, including in 2016 using blogs where students would discuss and apply theories and themes of popular culture. That year, Eaton also introduced extra credit options and opportunities to engage in writing/creating outside of the classroom that connected to pop culture. An example of this is writing relevant pieces for the school newspaper.

In 2017, Eaton added Web-based annotation to the course, such that students could annotate the course learning guides with commentary, ideas, and research that would then be integrated into future learning guides; they could do this in lieu of the blog each week. Weekly reflections were added to help students better connect the different activities and their learning.

Finally, in 2018, Eaton introduced an approach called the “Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Option”. The DIY option lets students choose to craft their own course on pop culture. The course students created would be based on areas of the subject they wanted to learn. Students produced tangible things such as podcasts, video series, and blog posts that demonstrated their learning.

While many such changes can be embraced in a F2F environment, especially with abundant online tools, their integration in an online course can help overcome limitations inherent in F2F classes. These integrated practices help students leverage the Internet to empower themselves as creators of content and critical participants in popular culture. Effective strategies for integrating these practices will be covered in the final section of the article. Next, this paper will dig into how these changes imbue constructivist practices to improve student learning.

## **UDL AS CONSTRUCTIVIST PRACTICE**

Universal design for learning (UDL) is significantly informed by constructivism (Izzo, et al, 2011).

UDL focuses on learning through the students' lens to consider how they engage, make sense of, and demonstrate their learning, given their context, choices, and abilities. UDL aims for multiple means of engagement (motivation-focused), representation (content-focused), action, and expression (communication of learning-focused). These veins come from UDL's guiding framework for curriculum to meet the needs of a diverse student body. Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, and Jackson (2002) identify four goals of a UDL curriculum: be challenging for all students, provide materials in a variety of modalities, include a range of learning experiences, and incorporate flexible and diverse assessments.

The central tenant among those goals is a desire to be responsive to the individual student. This emphasis aims to connect the student with course learning by having choices or modes of learning that meet students where they are; that is, the structural support from UDL empowers students to find useful ways of integrating knowledge and skills with how they understand their world already. A UDL-inspired course, then becomes a welcoming environment where unnecessary hurdles are reduced and learning is configured to be more relevant and contextualized to the students' needs which empowers them to engage actively in their learning (Scott, et al, 2015; Smith, 2012; Tobin, 2014).

### **Multiple Modalities to Support UDL**

Multiple modalities is typically defined as including multiple modes of representation such as text, video, audio, and images (Anstey & Bull, 2008). In today's society, a large percentage of content relies on different modes of communication (Kohut, et al, 2011). Even when one looks at an app like Instagram which is categorized under photo-image (and video) apps, other modalities, such as text through chat features, are present. Using multiple modalities for learning is both a tenant of UDL and an important practice for preparing students for the future. Providing opportunities for students to engage with, analyze and create artifacts in multiple modalities will better prepare students for their careers and as 21st century digital citizens.

A major affordance of an online course is the potential to integrate multiple modalities in a variety of ways. While F2F courses can support multiple-modalities, in an online course, the LMS is the central space for gathering for students and instructors. Therefore, rather than being supplemental as is in F2F courses, instructors can use and support multiple modalities simultaneously as a natural part of the learning environment.

In this course, Eaton embraced multiple modalities for learning content. First, he focused on locating learning material in various modalities and then, created new learning multimedia. Finally, he structured the course so students could select learning materials.

Eaton felt obligated to fully use the textbook since students had bought it. Moving to OER created the opportunity to collect different resources for each module. Therefore, Eaton included a mix of materials that captured that week's content. For instance, in the module exploring the mythology of the cowboy, students choose among different sources including dime novels, old-time radio episodes, TV western episodes, and Western films.

Eaton created two types of learning materials: learning guides and big-concepts videos. The learning guides were introductory material that provided context and framed the big ideas and questions. The guides were textual with occasional images that Eaton later turned into MP3 recordings so as to expand media options. The big-concept videos were usually several short videos each week (to the total of 20-30 minutes) that explored a major framework, theory, or ideology relevant to the present or future week's content. These videos include topics such as feminist theory, hegemony, critical theory, and semiology.

To allow for a variety of thought and interest, students could often choose the primary analytical reading or many of the additional materials. Other times, they were encouraged to find a relevant resource that could enhance their learning on the subject and explain how it did so, either in the discussions or on the course blog. To encourage students to make thoughtful decisions about what they would explore in a given

week, they were given a survey the week prior and asked to identify what materials they would use for the following week. This helped Eaton to think about what questions to ask and to whom but also to get a sense of what the students had covered.

Engaging in multiple modalities goes beyond just what the instructor does in the course. It also has been important to consider and encourage students to use multiple modalities in demonstrating their learning. Giving students the option to create multimodal texts that integrate audio, video, and/or text can provide students the opportunity to challenge themselves. Additionally, integrating multimodality into a course provides the opportunity to discuss accessibility concerns, as one challenge of creating multimodal texts is ensuring that these texts are accessible.

### **OPEN PEDAGOGY AS CONSTRUCTIVIST PRACTICE**

Definitions of open pedagogy vary (DeRosa, & Jhangiana, n.d.; Sinkinson, 2018). But at the time, Eaton worked primarily from David Wiley's definition which focuses on the idea that the activities and assignments in a course should have a life beyond the course. While many educators hope for such an outcome, they often miss the opportunity to do so (Wiley, 2013).

The course materials and the student artifacts created can be used beyond the given course and in doing so, become more relevant and meaningful to students. After all, no one likes to hear that they will spend time and effort on something that will then be largely forgotten. However, explaining to students that what they are doing in that course has implications not just for themselves but for others can motivate and engage learners more because it makes their work meaningful.

Open pedagogy overlaps with both UDL and the constructivist approach. Open pedagogy can operate as the driving force of an ongoing shared-power engagement strategy. It can also be more focused as an applied approach to create meaningful demonstrations of learning (DeRosa, R. & Jhangiana, R., n.d.). In this course, the practice focused on the latter form of open pedagogy. Not only was their choice around assignments, but many assignments had a higher purpose than just meeting course objectives. Assignments are crafted to be learning objects from which others can benefit. Assignments gave room for students to connect the course content and learning to things that were meaningful to their world while also creating a situation where others would learn from that student.

Open pedagogy in this context represents a constructivist approach, particularly in how it is executed. By having students create knowledge by blending their areas of interest with learning activities that capture their explorations, it helps students blend what they know with what they are learning. However, many of those learning objects then become future potential artifacts for other students and people beyond the class. In this way, the open pedagogical approach creates an interesting constructivist method of paying it forward, wherein students learn from previous students' works and to which those students will contribute to future students' work.

### **Breadth and Depth Supported by Open Pedagogy**

Many instructors grapple with how to tease out the tension between doing a systematic survey and diving deeply into focused areas. For a course that covers something as vast as pop culture, striking a balance is quite challenging. Students come into the course with strong filters about what they want the course to cover or assume the course is about.

There are several ways to strike this balance of capturing students' interests and providing structural knowledge around the study of this multi-faceted and ceaselessly expanding realm. For the first two-thirds of the course, several themes, areas, and technologies over the last three centuries provide a strong foundation across popular culture. Students are encouraged to focus their assignments on things that interest them. This

constructivist approach allows students to dive more deeply into their interests but through the learning they have been exposed to in a given module. This strategy leans on students' interests, where students are better off incorporating their interests into their learning while also exposing them to new ideas, theories, and relational knowledge connected to their interests.

Each week students are tasked with a choice between two constructivist activities. For one activity, they apply a particular theme or theory to a realm of popular culture (e.g. explore examples of mass-culture critiques at work in modern culture, identify modern examples of cultural cowboys). The other activity entails annotating the week's learning guide to add salient points they have found and that are relevant to the learning guide from the readings and additional research. In either case, students are more capable of blending their knowledge and interests with the big ideas of the course.

While the course mainly focuses on the instructor providing a breadth of pop culture and students finding their own depths within pop culture, the final third of the course shifts toward depth. Four modules offer the opportunity for a deep dive through a series of case studies. Therefore, instead of a wider exploration such as the impact of radio on pop culture, it focuses more specifically on topics like horror comics, youth culture and censorship in the 1950s. Case studies in popular culture like these draw upon rich materials such as old comics found on the Digital Comic Museum, dime novels on the Internet Archive, and old horror films found on YouTube.

For a course-project, students can create these case studies, which later students can elect to take in future sections. Through the structure of these final modules, this open pedagogical approach utilizes the constructivist idea of choosing more relevant material while also having the ability and option to forge new lessons in areas of interest for the betterment of current and future students.

## **INTERACTION ONLINE AS CONSTRUCTIVIST PRACTICE**

All online interactions are mediated by technology. Students cannot walk up to the instructor after class to ask a question. Instructors cannot gauge a student's understanding instantaneously by reading their face. Instead, interactions occur via email, chat, course announcements, or video conferencing tools. Online courses have historically been criticized for a lack of instructor-student interactions (Dennen, et al, 2007; Swan et al., 2000; Picciano, 2002), but recent studies suggest a potential of online courses to improve the quality and quantity of instructor-student interactions (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).

Online courses can provide students with a variety of ways to assert their voice. In F2F courses, the standard method of raising a hand and speaking to the whole class may intimidate students, including those coming from diverse linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds. Research suggests some students who struggle with finding a voice in the traditional classroom can utilize mediating technologies to create more space for their voice (Sauro, 2009). As Swan (2001) notes, "all students have a voice and no students can dominate the conversation" in asynchronous online discussions (p. 310). The asynchronous nature of online discussions can support a more democratic, equitable, and reflective discussion (Swan, 2001) in which all students in a course are empowered to participate.

Asynchronous interactions provide students and instructors alike the opportunity to interact according to their schedule and as often as needed. Therefore, online courses can support interactions that extend beyond the time of a typical F2F course across an entire week. A well-structured course might have numerous interactions across different channels (email, feedback, discussions, announcements, weekly reflections, video conferences, and online office hours) during a week. Though online asynchronous instructor-student interactions have been questioned as to their effectiveness, scholars have suggested that continuous online asynchronous interactions can be highly interpersonal (Walther, 1994). In fact, Swan's (2001) study on asynchronous online courses found that students enjoyed the continuous nature of the asynchronous

instructor-student interactions in their courses and that perceptions of high instructor-student interactions correlated with student satisfaction with the course overall. Students seeking flexibility due to work and family demands can schedule interactions around their schedules. This flexibility can support students who may have historically struggled with interacting in courses due to work and family demands.

### **Types of Interactions Supported in the Online Course**

Meaningful interaction occurs in several distinct ways within the course, with some approaches using multiple forms of media to maximize impact. These interactions include one-directional communications, reflection and dialogue, feedback, and encouragement to students to use multimedia in their work.

While one-way communications do not necessarily foster direct engagement, they can help to humanize the instructor. For text-based announcements, Eaton uses an enthusiastic and warm tone. For video announcements, Eaton maintains eye contact with the camera and maintains a lively delivery while following along to but not reading a script. The script keeps Eaton on track while also providing a text for accessibility. The instructor-created content is dynamic, offering up a series of videos on pop culture, turning the learning guides into audio recordings, and including relevant images throughout. The learning guide is created to be more dialogic, with students being able to ask questions through the Google Doc comment feature or add to what is already there. For the introductory discussion forums, Eaton replied to each student introduction with a personalized video that asks questions and welcomes the student to the class. Finally, throughout the course he may create additional videos where relevant (e.g. how to access grades, the blog, or other quick-walkthroughs).

Interactions happen beyond the learning content. Each week, students complete a reflection about their learning that week using three questions. The first question focuses on what they did or did not complete that week and why. This question helps identify what is too much or too little for future iterations as well as helps students in their accountability. The second question asks students what is the most salient thing they have learned. This question supports learning reinforcement and also highlights student takeaways, thus guiding the editing of the module in the future. The final question asks for their questions and concerns regarding the week. The students have an opportunity to voice feedback and challenges they have.

That in itself makes the reflection a great tool for enhancing learning. However, these reflections act as a dialogue as Eaton often replied to each directly, acknowledging the challenges they faced that week, encouraging their learning, and responding to their questions. Even if the student has reported not doing any work, he avoids negative or critical feedback in this space. Rather, this is a place to talk and figure out what is working and where there are obstacles while creating a community online.

Another means of creating interaction is through an early course survey. Usually by week three or four, the students have figured out the rhythm and the challenges of online courses (especially if it's one of their first online experiences). At this point, the students fill out a survey about their experience in the course. The survey is anonymous to solicit genuine answers and the results are shared and discussed in an announcement where questions and comments are addressed. Like the reflection, this practice reinforces the point that students are heard and are part of the online community.

One more extension of student feedback and dialogue comes in the form of the syllabus where students are encouraged to discuss and add what they believe the course expectations for students and the instructor should be. By using Google Docs and allowing students direct access to edit and add to the Syllabus, it not only bestows a level of trust in them but also creates a more collaborative space that encourages them to think of it as more as their space than in other courses.

Assignment feedback also opens up the possibility for more engagement and dialogue. Assignment feedback usually entails annotations and solicitations to respond to comments that Eaton left as well as a rubric and often, the opportunity to revise. At times, Eaton provided video feedback that screen-records the



student's paper to focus in on certain areas and provide holistic feedback. Students regularly respond to the power of hearing the tone and emphasis and how it helps them understand and ultimately feel less combative about the feedback. Halfway through the course, each student receives a video review from Eaton about where they have done well and where they should focus their efforts moving forward. This video is usually of the student's grades thus far in the course. Students receive this video via email. Here again, this sparks an opportunity for a dialogue with the student that reinforces the connection between instructor and student.

The final means of using and encouraging online interaction is nudging the students to use multimedia throughout the semester. They may at first be encouraged to find multimedia such as videos, podcasts, and websites to bring into the discussion, blog, or learning guides. However, as the course progresses, they are encouraged to use video and audio as their replies in the discussion or on the blog so as to get them more comfortable with the medium but also encouraging them to work on other communication skills. Additionally, for those who work on the case study as a final project, they are encouraged to create some video lessons to help students understand the concepts they are exploring.

Though instructor-student interactions are inherently different in online courses, leveraging integrated technologies to provide dialogic feedback can improve instructor-student interactions beyond even what they would receive in a F2F course.

## **STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES IN ONLINE COURSES**

Course design is an iterative process. This particular course represents a decade of iteration. The result of this effort has been a recognition of Eaton's work with receiving the Massachusetts Colleges Online Course of Distinction award.

Given this decade of work, there are five strategies for instructors or instructional designers as they work to develop an online course that aligns with constructivist practices. The strategies described are informed by reflection on one online popular culture course, however, the strategies and instructional practices are broadly applicable to online courses which seek to align with constructivist theory.

### **Incremental Changes**

For good course design, incremental change is probably the best pursuit unless one has been given substantial time to design a course. Even when substantial time is allotted, the various moving parts of the course and adapting to new practices in different areas of a course, may still be too much to handle. For instance, introducing a blog, student-created case studies, and annotations all at once might have led to more challenges for the instructor to think through the different problems that each could create. Each change will require some time to adjust and see how it fits with the other parts of a course. Taking on all the tools and practices at once, instructors or students may find themselves burnt out or running into numerous technical or process challenges.

### **Contextualize the What and Why**

Part of gradually launching different facets of the course will allow the instructor to better scaffold the rationale for including each new element and connecting it to other parts and practices within the course. Many courses lack a clear and stated rationale about what is being done and why along with how it connects to the course outcomes. Assignments and activities in these courses are offered but not clearly understood in relation to the course or the instructor's pedagogical approaches. By slowly introducing each element, it provides time and opportunity to communicate with students the what and the why of the instructor's approach.

Explaining pedagogical choices can be particularly useful for students at a community college who are returning to education after a prolonged absence. Since many have likely been exposed to the banking

model of teaching and learning, providing some insight as to the benefits of a more open and interactive approach can help them understand how this learning approach is different and important for their learning (Freire, 1996). Furthermore, providing context and using constructivist models for teaching such a course can empower students who may have felt marginalized or out-of-place in more traditional learning environments as it emphasizes the importance of their experiences to their learning.

### **Assemble the Team**

The course discussed in this article happened because Eaton looked to colleagues for input, support, and guidance, repeatedly over the years. From input from other instructional designers to discussions with librarians about library resources to adapting ideas from other instructors to guidance from accessibility services, the course improved because others were willing to help. Teaching is often portrayed as a solitary act but to improve a course it often takes inviting others to help and provide feedback in the process. Inevitably, instructors need to do a lot of work to improve a course but that does not mean they have to do it alone. Most institutions have a variety of staff that can aid in the process and even if they do not, there are many communities online to find help.

### **Get Uncomfortable**

Letting go of the reins of the course can be challenging for many instructors. Often, this is a reflection of our own educational past. The first few times one allows students full editing powers of the syllabus, they are going to feel anxious and may constantly check to make sure it is still there. (Don't worry, if using Google Docs, there is a version history.) Finished products, be they blog posts, annotations or case studies, may not look like how the instructor envisioned them and it may seem that the student has not met the barest expectations. However, that does not mean failure, but an opportunity to revisit, revise, and retry. Even our most traditional approaches fail to engage or effectively evaluate students so it should be no surprise that the first time something new is tried, it stumbles a bit.

### **Own Mistakes**

Instructors can go a long way with their students by owning mistakes. It happened recently in this course when Eaton added an element to the course that failed--in large part because he did not heed the advice in this section. He rushed to introduce the DIY Project, did not give sufficient context, and did not have others provide feedback.

Inspired by open pedagogy, he pitched an offer to students. They could create their own course by researching content, creating learning materials, and crafting something that others could learn from. Created on short notice, it left Eaton scrambling to develop the resources and right level of interaction for those involved. Students could self-select into this project or go with the way the course was traditionally set up. What started with a group of eight people, eventually dwindled down to none. Because Eaton took a risk with their education, he worked with them to merge back into the traditional course.

Mistakes will happen, implementations may falter; regardless of how much one prepares. Sometimes, one might look to blame it on the students but if the instructor is trying something new and students are not responding or following through, then it might reflect missing things or not properly setting up the situation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Moving this popular culture course to an online format supported constructivist approaches as exemplified by the use of:

- multimodal approaches to support universal design for learning,
- greater breadth and depth of topics covered enabled by open pedagogy, and
- meaningful and varied interactions.

The online environment created a course that uniquely afforded these constructivist approaches, however they were not all adopted in the first iteration of this course. Transforming the F2F version of this course into an online format supported a reflective, iterative process that allowed this course to be progressively revised in order to increasingly leverage constructivist approaches. With constructivist approaches, this course better aligned with the learning outcomes of the popular culture course as well as the students attending an online community college course.

While this course is by no means perfect or even in its final state, understanding the first-hand experience of an educator as he continually adapted a course to be more deeply aligned with constructivist approaches will hopefully inspire other educators to reflect on their own courses to decide whether a move to the online environment could similarly leverage constructivism.

The course as it has been developed provides strong considerations for others who teach online and in particular, popular culture online. As a discipline, pop culture is often interested in exploring power, engagement, and democratic experiences across areas of culture that have largely been dismissed by the elites. It is looking at the ways mass culture produces meaning in complex ways to the every-person. Therefore, a course on pop culture (physical or digital) should also reconsider this discourse as it plays out in students' education at a community college; a place also created for the masses and often seen and portrayed as adequate or insufficient by elite culture.

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