# Ep. 070: Quality Online Courses

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What does it take to create a truly powerful online learning experience for our students?  A year of remote instruction thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic has left many more of us in a position to better appreciate that question.

For this episode, Jim is joined by two colleagues from CTLT: Linda Summers is the coordinator for Blended and Online Learning, and Dr. Steve Travers is the coordinator for Student Success Initiatives. Together, they examine how a quality online course differs in both design and delivery from the more "just in time" experiences necessitated during the pandemic.  Linda and Steve showcase two CTLT professional development programs, DART Online and TOP. They also discuss other, less involved learning opportunities for instructors who want to teach blended or online content.

## Transcript

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| JIM: | Hi there. I'm Jim. |
| LINDA: | I'm Linda. |
| STEVE: | I'm Steve, |
| JIM: | Let's Talk Teaching |
| JIM: | Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. Joining me today to talk about things that are called DART and TOP and AIM. We do like our acronyms here. Joining me today, two of my colleagues from the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology. Linda Summers is our coordinator for blended and online learning. Hi, Linda. |
| LINDA: | Hi, Jim. |
| JIM: | And Dr. Steve Travers is our coordinator for student success initiatives. Hi, Steve. |
| STEVE: | Hi, Jim. |
| JIM: | Well, thank you both for coming. This is I think, your first time being on our pokey little podcast. We're excited today to kind of talk about these specific programs we offer here through CTLT. To help faculty members design and deliver quality online programs. As we're recording this, we are back to face to face teaching in the fall of 2021. On campus, most of us and I know personally, the pandemic was the first time I had taught a class online or at least delivered it remotely. I don't I don't know if we even want to say if we call it fully online, because it certainly wasn't designed that way. So, help us understand. What do students get out of a class that is designed from the beginning to be online as opposed to what a lot of them experienced? Over the course of the pandemic, what makes a good online course from a student's perspective? |

LINDA:    The difference between remote and a course that is taught or as designed as a fully online course would be similar to in teaching writing a brand-new student in academic writing, basically, right often writes a brain dump what's considered a brain dump, it's just a mess. It's just everything they know, dumped in there. And that would be the equivalent oftentimes of remote you've never taught online, you've never taken a class online. So basically, it's what do I just do today to get through, you know, we're a fully online course that was designed proactively design and based in the research of instructional design is more like the students at the end of that program at the end of the writing program. And best-case scenario would be the, the, end of a graduate level writing where they can teach it, you know, that would be kind of the comparative of just in time remote versus the planning process and building it with the quality design in mind.

JIM:      And I guess, Steve, that also means that, and I'll confess, I've done this once in a while. You just can't show up on the day and kind of wing it, you know, you know, the material. So, you're just kind of winging the teaching. There's a lot of planning that goes into not just designing a course, but also delivering an online course.

STEVE:    Yeah, I mean, I think with the pandemic, it was thankful we had Zoom, because I think that, you know, worked well, for a lot of the instructors who, and had all that experience teaching online, they could sort of take what they do in the classroom, you know, a lot of black show, probably, and put it right on Zoom, and kind of simulate what they were doing face to face. But with a nice quality online course, too. I think one of the things I think of with it, too, is once you get it online, it is something that students can, I don't know about the best way to put it, but it almost comes naturally to them that to go through the course or work through the course it's not overloaded with too much stuff, all kinds of technology and other things. But it's something that is very straightforward, something that is no issues to work through easy to follow. Simple, and has nice structure to it. I guess that's the best way to put it. I think so.

JIM:      Yeah, absolutely. Another thing that as you kind of mentioned, Steve came up during the course of remote learning during the pandemic, which is this idea of synchronous versus asynchronous. A lot of the courses that we were designing on campus before the pandemic online courses, were actually geared towards an asynchronous learning experience. Was that, is that right, Linda?

LINDA:    The fully online courses that we offered previously, yes; the majority were asynchronous. And the purpose behind that is because the student demographic, they had a family they had a full-time job. So, the synchronous was the reason that they needed to go fully online because they couldn't be on campus at a particular time. So that was the focus but when we went to the remote because in response to the pandemic The students who are already going to class at a regular time, so most of our faculty, just, just, most of our faculty used use Zoom to continue teaching or attempting to teach the class in the same way that they did before. And overall, we were incredibly successful given the support that we got from our champions who had taught previously online.

JIM: Yeah. Is it fair to say there's nothing inherently better with one modality or the other? It depends on the circumstances that you can have a quality online course that's taught largely synchronously, but also, it works really well, asynchronously.

LINDA: The key that we always try to focus in on is authenticity, to meet, to find the best way to support the success of our students, whatever their life situation is, but also to be authentic to the field that they are going into. So, in the case of what we're doing right now, with podcasting, it would make sense, we could record that anywhere, we could go to a studio, or we could use Zoom like we are right now to reflect the current skill set of the people in that profession. So that would be the overall goal was to support the student success given their life situation and to be authentic to the profession.

STEVE: Yeah, that's what I was going to say, it's more, it's more of a win. I think asynchronous versus synchronous depends on your audience, I think, who your students are, as Linda was saying, you know, a lot of students have full time jobs, or, you know, are adults that are married, have kids that are coming back to school, maybe taking a class, and that asynchronous works better for them. And that some of our younger students who are like freshmen, you know, first semester students, they need that guidance. And I think the synchronous portion, in that teacher presence, then being able to see that face on Zoom or something like that works a lot better for them.

JIM: You know, it struck me as interesting, a colleague, during the pandemic made an observation that, you know, even when we talk face to face, there is a and I'm using air quotes. Now on an audio podcast, I apologize. There is an asynchronous component to every course, I expect them to go read and to do homework and to and to do things during the week, when we're not actually meeting face to face. So, so let's talk specifically about Linda, you'd mentioned champions, explain who these folks are, and how they helped us out. And also, that's a good segue to talk about the particular programs that we have coming up that others may want to take advantage of on campus.

LINDA: The champions at ISU have gone through professional development to learn to design quality courses. Some have also gone through our newer program TOP to learn to, to learn the research-based methods on how to teach or to deliver an online course. So, they not only had this professional development education, but they had applied it and used it and matured it in their teaching experience, like we all do. And then whenever the pandemic hit, we reached out to them and said, we really need some help, because the majority of our faculty have zero experience teaching online, the majority of them have not even taken a class online. So, it's a, it's a shadow on the wall to them, they have no idea what to do. They know how to teach they're experts in their field, but they need some peer mentoring and coaching and support. And we have a very small department. So, we really need more people to help university wide, and we had over 100 step up and say I'm here they did, consultations via zoom and looked at each other's courses talk through problems that they were having. And overall, it was hugely successful, we would not have done so well, without their support, it would not have happened so smoothly.

JIM: And we've been using this word quality. But when it comes to what we're talking about, this is not a subjective thing. This is you said research based. So, Linda or Steve, I know you both have experienced with it, can you talk a little bit about Quality Matters? Because you're going to be able to explain it a lot better than I can. But what, what, this organization has, you're both pointing at each other, not it? I won't touch their nose. So, Steve, Steve, Steve, let me start with you. What is the Quality Matters rubric that we use, and just kind of high altitude? How is it informing how we approach and help others approach professional development when it comes to online teaching?

LINDA: So, I think I can get the background if you want to give the, the, more specific Do you think.

STEVE: Yeah, I think the, the, way I think of it when I always think of quality matters. It's a rubric that helps you align your course, online. So, I mean, there's several different specific standards that they use in the rubric that your quality courses have to meet. They get scored based on the content that they have the activities that they have, and of course, accessibility, the technology, all kinds of stuff. it, basically, it's a way to make sure that the things that you're doing online, the activities, those learning materials that you're using, all line up to support the learning outcomes of your course.

JIM: And Linda, this is a this is a nationally or internationally recognized group that first developed this group of scholars, right?

LINDA: It is, for those who aren't aware of Quality Matters, you can go on their website and look over more thoroughly. You can even see an executive summary of the rubric if you're interested in more details. But the way Quality Matters got started was through a FIPS, a grant through the Department of Education in 2003. And it was interdisciplinary. The question that they tried to answer was, how do we determine the quality of an online course. And this group interdisciplinary group got together and created the initial rubric. So as faculty designed, it wasn't an outside entity, it was those who taught online design this, and they came up with these quality factors since 2003. Once the grant went out, in three years, it became a nonprofit because it was so successful faculty said, I, this makes sense to me, I want to use this not only to determine the quality of my course, but to help use it as a basically a set of instructions to design my course to build it. So, it's very holistic tool. It is now and freestanding standing, or what do you call an independent nonprofit, it is international, the rubric has been translated into various languages. Now, it's also used on in the K 12 system. And it also is used on MOOCs as well as publisher sites. So, it just keeps building and building and building. It is still a nonprofit, it is still driven by the people who teach online. So, it has a very rich history. And I think that's a lot of his success is those who teach are the ones who use it and improve it.

JIM: So, we'll link to the Quality Matters website on the Show page for our episode today. And we'll also link to our programs that we have that are kind of based on this. So, DART and TOP we're talking about today. So, for both of you, I'd like to start with DART, which is actually something that may be familiar to faculty members on campus,

we've been doing DART for quite a long time now six or seven years, at least, right Linda?

LINDA: Spring of 14.

JIM: Okay, so it has it has been a while. So, DART stands for design, align, refine, and teach online. So, all these words that we've been using in this conversation, if I remember correctly, it's it is geared still towards faculty members who are designing or who are designing a course to be delivered online for the first time. Is that right?

LINDA: In most cases, yes. In some cases, they have designed a course a brain dump course going back to the brain dump, they've designed a course that it wasn't based on any instructional design knowledge. So, they want to start from scratch and rebuild a course.

JIM: So, Steve, if you could tell us what, what, is the experience going to be like for someone who's actually doing DART?

STEVE: Yeah, it's a semester long online program that is going to be delivered asynchronously. Beginning next semester, we're not going to be doing any synchronous zoom sessions with it, which we have done in the past, usually. And basically, there's, oh, gosh, I can't remember how many units that we have the Dark Horse setup in. But we're going to start people, faculty learn how to do the backwards design, type, of course design, and start with things like learning outcomes, how to develop good learning outcomes, and then activities to go along with those and the materials to go along with those. And to begin looking at things like accessibility, and courses and different technologies that you can use.

JIM: Okay, and, and, to go back to a little bit of what we talked about before. So, you are so DART will be an online learning experience. So that goes back to what Linda had talked about before, this idea that we had instructors during the pandemic myself was I was one of them, who had never actually taken an online course, let alone taught one. But also, they'll so they'll be taking an online course as it were. But also, just because it's a synchronous doesn't mean they're not going to get feedback on their work as they go along. Is that right?

STEVE: Yeah, we're constantly giving them feedback.

LINDA: Yeah. And the way the way DART is designed is the way that we tried to design the majority of our professional development CTLT and it's, it's peer coaching, peer reviewing peer feedback, so we're there to guide that process. But the hope is that they that we cross pollinate across disciplines across a new faculty member, sharing with a professor perfect, you know, full professor, that whole range is just the cross pollination really helps a lot in expanding, what we know and what we have yet to learn regarding all the things in DART, and all the things about designing a course. And it is. Quality Matters is basically one of the textbooks, you could call it a textbook in DART. But we also tap into other instructional design theory, such as the concept of social presence, teaching presence, things like that. So, it's, it's kind of the spine to the program. But there are a lot of other things that feed into it. Actually,

| JIM: | I like the way you described it. And I liked the idea of cross pollination, as well. And that kind of leads us you know, just as we as we wrap up here, I want to make sure we talk about TOP, which is an acronym meaning teaching online program. So, a little, little, more generic, but it has an important focus. And Linda, correct me if I'm wrong, if I remember correctly, this kind of came together as a natural progression, actually delivering the darn thing. That's where talk came in. Right. |
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| LINDA: | The DART program was about designing the course. And from the first offering in spring of 2014. Many people, not everyone, but a lot of people who went through DART said we want DART 2, we feel like we want more. And the more was refining it and maturing it, but also teaching it because the maturing and refining comes from teaching and saying, oh, this could be fixed or that, you know, a few things weren't quite as smooth as we had hoped. But how do we do that? What are our options for getting students to participate and to interact more with each other and with us? So that's what top addresses. |
| STEVE: | I think it also came out of, I think the people finishing DART, the faculty, the instructors that are going through DART after they teach that first semester, too, I think they kind of get that feeling of oh, yeah, that design worked really well. But now I'd like to maybe learn more about, you know, teaching online and how that works. So that's kind of where the TOP started with that. |
| JIM: | And so, Linda, there is a for both of these programs. Participants need to be nominated by their department chair, their school director, but there's also a little bit more of a prerequisite for TOP, is that right? |
| LINDA: | Yes, DART is, the focus is on design or redesign. If you don't have any instruction design background, you might want to go ahead and take it to just to learn about what the what the criteria are for, for designing a course that can help students succeed in the online environment. But the only prerequisite for DART is to be nominated by your department chair or school director. Whereas TOP you need some experience teaching a class online, even if it's the remote from the pandemic, that's some experience, because it's hugely peer driven. And we need the experience to share ideas and talk through what worked well, what could have been better, and then base it on these research data that we find that we share with each other. |
| JIM: | And just to confirm, during the spring or the fall when we offer these programs, we're usually expecting participants to commit about four to five hours a week, for the entire semester, right? |
| LINDA: | Yes, it is a semester long. Yeah, something that we didn't talk about a lot. But I just want to plug here is that we did talk about the Quality Matters rubric, we do have what I would call an abbreviated version of DART through QM. It's a two-week course sometimes we can offer an all-day eight hour synchronous, but it is an abbreviated version of DART. That's called the design your online course DYOC. We also have something comparable to AIM which is IYOC improve your online course. And then Steve, you facilitate the APPQMR. |
| STEVE: | Yeah, the applying the Quality Matters rubric. So, take some serious time though to do. |

JIM: It does, it does. These are not your, your, short courses like we do for how to how to open up your email or how to open up OneDrive or anything like that. But exciting stuff. And we've had a lot of faculty members who've gone through it successfully on our campus, and we're hoping to have even more take advantage of it. So, we'll link to a lot of the information about the different programs we talked about on our website. But Linda Steve, thank you so much.

LINDA: Thank you, Jim.

STEVE: Thanks, Jim.

JIM: So again, find out more about DART about TOP, about all of the online support that we do here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology. Go to CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. For Linda Summers for Steve Travers, for all of my colleagues here at CTLT until we talk again, happy teaching.