Podcast for Module 2: Preparation, Part 1

Welcome to the Podcast for Module Two. I will be discussing the first three essential elements found in Section One of our text, *Essential Elements*, along with a few tips from another source and my own experiences.

When I last spoke to you we looked at the nine characteristics of The Concord Consortium e-Learning Model. To give a very quick recapitulation, the nine characteristics which we will endeavor to meet are: Asynchronous collaboration, explicit schedules, expert facilitation, inquiry pedagogy, high-quality materials, community building, limited enrollment, purposeful virtual spaces, and ongoing assessment.

There are three sections within which we will learn how to meet these characteristics: Preparation, Design, and Teaching. Seventeen essential elements populate these three sections.

Section 1 is composed of the first six essential elements. It deals with the preparation stage of creating an online course. Of the three sections, preparation really sets the tone for everything else. Here we tackle the theory of learning in an online environment and our own new roles within this arena.

I encourage you to take a look at Appendix C beginning on page 99, a checklist of the To-Do items presented in the book. Using this checklist may very well aid you as you progress through this certification course.

The first Essential Element, Prepare to Teach Online, involves a personal paradigm shift. We are no longer connected to our students by occupying the same physical space, discussing the same topic at exactly the same time, and using body language to communicate our ideas to our students -- and using their body language to gauge their understanding. And, most importantly, we are no longer possess the physical presence on which we normally rely to lead our students through the course materials. Our educational leadership responsibilities remain, but how we accomplish these requires a new set of tools. Essential Element 1 introduces us to this shift. Allow me to highlight a few of the tips discussed by our authors.

I mentioned in the previous podcast that we are now guides rather than academic performers. Because we are not able to have a regular physical presence before our students, we do not have the ability to personally present three hours of lectured materials each week for several months, backed up by the assigned readings and activities. Instead, our roles switch in terms of presentation, that is, how the course concepts are delivered to the students. We are no longer lecturers with the majority of the course content existing within our minds that we transmit through the traditional chalk-and-talk method. Rather, we are now academic guides. We are still as present and interactive with our students as in the face-to-face setting (perhaps even more so, especially on a one-on-one basis), but in a different manner. We shift roles from being the verbal textbook to guiding students through resources that present the information we want our students to learn. One of these resources is still us, such as podcasts, videos, text lectures, discussion forum posts, and email that we create. But it is likely that the majority of the content with which our students interact will be resources that we did not create, such as those that we have gathered together and what they will learn from each other. It is important that we begin to think in these terms, which will greatly aid us as we begin to pull resources together and craft group learning opportunities.

A second tip listed by our authors touches on our own preparation for the online environment. One of the best ways to learn how online courses function differently than face-to-face courses is to become an online student. You are doing exactly that with this certification course. You are able to see the

advantages and limitations, challenges and opportunities online learning holds from the same perspective of your future -- or current -- online students. This experience, plus all that you will learn here, will be of tremendous benefit to you and your students.

Another point that I wish to highlight is the importance of learning how to express oneself in text. In the classroom our mannerisms, body language, and voice inflections communicate more of our meaning than the words that we speak. But in emails, text lectures, and discussion forums, such communication is lost. Podcasts and videos add much that is lacking, and so I encourage the use of these media in addition to text. But without body language and the instant interaction of the classroom, much of our meaning can still be lost. And, worse, students can easily take something we write in the wrong manner. This has happened to me, and I tend to think of my writing as rather expressive. Emoticons (a combination of the words "emotional" and "icons") can add elements from the goofy to the puzzled, astonished to the proud. Decades ago emoticons began as simple sideways combinations of text as we see at the bottom of page 19, with the proper sequencing of colons and letters to display facial expressions. Since the book *Essential Elements* was written, emoticons on our cell phones and in our emails have taken on a life of their own. We can now add aliens and faces with costumes to more accurately, or more bizarrely, add emotional elements to static text. Feel free to experiment with these in your own personal life, and at the very least, to play with the "old" text-based emoticons within the discussion forums in this course.

A further point within the first element that I think deserves mention is the need to set aside time. It takes more time to prepare and design an online course than a face-to-face course -- because all of the elements and details need to be gathered, organized, and developed beforehand as we also ponder how to "create" our presence once the course begins. Ideally, the course should be completely designed before the semester starts. Depending on your school, you may need to have the course designed and approved weeks, or months, before the semester begins. Whatever the case may be, you will be doing yourself a disservice if you design portions of the course while simultaneously teaching it, trying to stay a week ahead of the students. This point is reinforced in the second essential element, to which we will now turn.

Essential Element number two concerns the development of a course outline. The first order of business in creating an outline is nothing new to us: we must create the course objectives. While this is something we all consider when creating a new course or teaching the same one for the twentieth time, it is important that we write down these objectives and have them before us as we create our outline. It is also important that we make these objectives available to our students -- because we will not be physically present to make sure that our students stay within these objectives.

Creating a course outline can easily be the longest single component of the whole process. Page 21 contains a list of questions that you should ask yourself as you begin this process. I encourage you to use this list as you create your outline. I also suggest that you use as your basic time unit a week of seven days and create a weekly outline rather than a topical module outline -- for the reason that most courses exist within the semester or quarter structure, such as I mentioned in the previous podcast. We will go over the time aspect a bit more in the second section dealing with the development stage, but I want to address it now so that you can keep it in mind while you create your outline.

I have found that most students look at their assignments and due dates in terms of the calendars on their walls, not in terms of course concepts or chapters. So I try to provide them a structure that works best for them. Such weekly containers need to be consistently predictable, holding a regular pattern of assignments that are transmissive in nature -- those that transmit the materials to the students, such as readings, podcasts, videos, text lectures, etc. as well as transactive in nature --

those that have students interact with each other and us with them, such as discussion boards, group projects, emails, blogging, etc. We may also include turn-in assignments such as papers and annotated bibliographies that are emailed to us (or placed within an electronic drop-box) at various points throughout the semester or quarter. My suggestion is that each week look very similar in structure to the weeks before and after it, with some variation. The point is to give the students a comfortable expectation of structure, the same expectation that we find in a face-to-face course where the class meets in the same room at the same time and on the same days. I think that we can all agree that this lets the students concentrate on the content rather worrying about when and where the class will meet next -- and that inconsistency only breeds confusion and frustration. We need to provide the equivalent expected structure by having a consistent *weekly* structure. I vary the types of assignments throughout the semester, but the due dates of Wednesday and Sunday remain the same, there are always readings and discussions board assignments, and the various additional assignments are always due on Sunday, at the end of the week.

Martha Snyder, professor of Computing Technology in Education at Nova Southeastern University, in her article "Instructional-Design Theory to Guide the Creation of Online Learning Communities for Adults" (found in the January/February 2009 edition of *TechTrends*) discusses the importance of maintaining consistency and predictability: (quote) "Maintaining consistency and predictability supports the feeling of connection, strengthens trust among community members, and facilitates online learning activities (Ito, Adler, Linde, Mynatt, & O'Day, 1999). For example, members know what to expect from one week to the next. They come to rely on the server being up so they can access the community at any time and they know where to go for specific activities or types of information such as the course syllabus, specific course instructions, and additional resources. They know what to expect each week in terms of communication and lesson requirements. They know what to expect from the instructor and other members of the community." Such advice works equally well for the assignments we place into the weekly containers as well as the more technical aspects of where we place our course content on the computer screen.

Variety can, and should exist, but within a predictable framework, such as predictable due dates, formats, expectations, and weekly course load.

Also be prepared for most students to submit their work very close to the due dates. Most of my students work on their assignments the same day they are due, so I set such dates that work well with the typical schedule of my student population. For instance, all major assignments are due Sundays at Midnight, as my student population is composed of K-12 teachers and corporate trainers, hence, weekends are their off-days and the best times for them to devote the hours of concentrated study needed for large projects. As you structure your due dates keep in mind that most distance learning students have family, community, and/or professional requirements that often force them to do their assignments at the last minute. Structure your outline around such times as work best for their lives. For instance, if a majority of your students have pastoral duties on Sunday mornings, Saturdays and Sundays may not be good due dates, but perhaps Tuesdays would, giving them Monday to rest and a day to work on assignments on Tuesday.

As you begin to write down your weekly schedules you may stop and look at the calendar and be tempted to create breaks in the schedule to accommodate major holidays. This can be tricky, because the next time you teach this same course, the same holiday for which you planned, say Thanksgiving, may not exist the next semester the course is offered. I would, instead, create each semester as though holidays did not exist -- with one exception: Holy Week. If you know that your course will be offered in the Spring term, do give your students who have pastoral duties that week off. You can, if desired, assign supplemental materials and assignments during Holy Week which will not be critical to future classes or assessments.

Now that you have a basic weekly structure in mind that should work well for your students, start writing in the basic concepts that you want to teach. As you insert these topics into your outline, also consider how many days your students will need for each type of assignment that you anticipate will be required for each week. Keeping this in mind may seem a bit premature, especially as we look at the Sample Bulleted Outline on page 23 which does not go into such detail, but it is important to allow for the proper amount of time for each assignment -- so as not to overload your students one week compared to the following week. Writing out the number of days required may show you that one topic may take longer to complete than you otherwise thought it would, and you will need to adjust your outline accordingly. It is a tough balancing act, but one that you want to constantly think about at this stage.

One way to do this is to first view the course topics in light of being able to equitably break them down into fairly similar parts requiring similar effort to master. The purpose of this is to create an outline with a divisible structure that will neatly break down into your weeks. For instance, if you have four topics to address in sixteen weeks, consider breaking down each topic into four weeks that are composed of readings, activities, and assignments in each week. This way each topic is covered over a four-week period with a balanced set of similar requirements for each weekly container. If one topic is heavy, and another light, then the former may need five weeks and the latter balance it out by having only three weeks assigned to it. But in each instance, the weeks all contain similar assignments with similar effort and time required.

Your weekly containers should also be able to almost stand alone yet build on each other. I liken it to the difference between three types of television shows: the soap opera All My Children, the classic science fiction series Star Trek, The Original Series, and the serial science fiction show Babylon 5. This may be the first time All My Children and Star Trek are mentioned within the same sentence. In any event, let me explain. All My Children must be watched on a daily basis as each show builds on the previous day's episode; each show contains no beginning and no conclusion -- they are open ended, at *both* ends. Viewers must keep many threads in the air at once, and are allowed no closure at the end of each show -- the "cliff hanger" tactic to keep them coming back. We do not want to create weekly containers that are like soap operas. Our students must put our classes on hold to deal with life and then pick them up again when life permits. They need to be able to ramp-up their thinking, do the assignments, submit their work, and then have a bit of closure regarding that week's concepts so they can then continue on with life. Star Trek, the Original Series, episodes had definite beginnings and endings, entire stories self-contained within each episode. The audience is allowed to begin a story and then see it through to a conclusion, just what the typical online student who has other responsibilities needs from us. But Star Trek episodes can be seen almost at random, seemingly in endless combinations -- few themes build upon each in a chronological manner. Our only clue as to which episodes come after others is found in the star date that Captain Kirk mentions at the beginning of each episode in his log. Few courses would work well if we presented a collection of autonomous topics that seemed to have no relationship with each other, no scaffolding of knowledge. The combination that I am advocating can be found in the serial science fiction show Babylon 5: each show contained a beginning, the development of a theme, and a conclusion -- but elements from previous shows were referenced in subsequent shows. Episodes cannot easily be understood if viewed out of order, because events of one show are often built upon in subsequent episodes. Thus the individual shows allowed for major themes to be carried for entire seasons, giving the series the ability to build complex themes and continuity, but also allowing for audiences to enjoy new stories with their conclusions each week. We want to create these types of weekly containers that give our students the ability to begin and conclude each week, yet still build on the major themes of the course.

You will probably build your outline in multiple passes as you begin with basic concepts at first, then

add assignments, more resources, and finally the details of each assignment. This latter component is very important -- be sure to give your students the details they need, so as to prevent a flood of emails asking for clarification, such as page numbers, exact specifications of assignments, etc. Remember that you will not be available in a face-to-face classroom to impart this information nor to immediately correct misunderstandings. Build such detail into your outline so that the teaching of your online course is easier. For instance, I repeat the requirements of my assignments in each weekly container -- so many words required, specific issues to address, the due dates, etc. It may seem redundant, but I have found that such redundancy reduces student confusion and lessens the number of emails I receive for clarification.

A final note about this essential element, found on page 22: (quote) "...preparing and designing your course is the most time-consuming component of the online teaching experience. It can require more development time than a face-to-face course because you must include step-by-step directions for each activity..." This is certainly true. Do make sure that you plan for this amount of effort, and, if at all possible, have a colleague read over your course outline to find the areas that will need more details and explanations. You may be surprised at the amount of assuming you build into your course, assumptions that must be spelled out for your online students.

The last essential element that I will address in this podcast is creating a course schedule with clear deadlines. This element goes hand-in-hand with the previous one, and I have already discussed the suggestion of using the weekly format as the basic time unit, along with due dates. The issue of when your academic week starts and ends may not be entirely up to you. If your school begins every semester on a Monday, it may be awkward to begin your first week several days later; and if your semesters end on a Friday, you may loose a few days for the last week if you end your weeks on a Tuesday. You will need to balance the needs of your students and their schedules, with your school's schedule and requirements.

The length of your course may also be a non-negotiable, but the workload that you build into the course *is* under your control. As you are aware, the standard formula for face-to-face courses is one hour of class time per week per credit, with three hours of outside-class time for research and homework. But this formula does not easily translate into the realm of online coursework, due to the lack of obvious separation of contact methods. For instance, should a podcast created by you count towards in-class time? If so, what about a podcast created by a professor at another institution? Is your text lecture the same as in-class contact time or is it equivalent to reading the text, which is outside-class contact time?

Once we realize that we cannot easily equate online course exposure to the categories used in face-to-face classes, we must then ask ourselves the question: How do we ensure that our online students receive as much course exposure as traditional students? Our authors suggest a wide spectrum ranging from five to fifteen hours per week, depending on numerous factors. At the graduate level, my suggestions are as follows, based on a three-credit course: allow for three hours per week of reading textual materials, one to two hours for other resources such as podcasts, videos, and online sources, and about one to two hours for online interaction such as discussion boards, emails, blogging, etc. This comes to a total of five to seven hours per week.

One thing to keep in mind about the differences between face-to-face and online course work is that the latter tends to be more intensive per hour, so I am not concerned about creating enough assignments to fill up twelve hours per week for a three credit course. Let us take a brief look at course contact hours, those hours that students make contact with the course materials, whether through lectures, readings, research, composition, or class discussion. If we all think back to our college days and remember the time wasted in a classroom for lectures to begin, transitions between

topics, and waiting for text to be written down on the chalk board -- let alone those times when classes were dismissed early -- we must admit that there really did not exist a full three hours of quality class time per week. And if we factor in the hours we spent on tests and examinations, which are not counted as contact time for online courses, we see fewer quality hours. But in the online realm, there is virtually no waiting for online text to appear (at least anything beyond several seconds), we only need to click through a few links to change topics, text already exists for students to read, and the presentation of course materials are not dependent upon the clock -- so there are no early class dismissals. It is almost like comparing apples and oranges when trying to equate face-to-face course contact hours and online course contact hours. So in my opinion, we need not try to come up with enough readings, activities, and assignments to occupy the average online student twelve hours a week so long as we provide quality contact time within a reasonable frame of five to seven hours.

A last item discussed by our authors involves the issue of synchronous meetings. Should we incorporate live sessions into our online courses? We must keep in mind that one of the reasons students take online courses is because of conflicts in scheduling between the responsibilities of life and the offerings of universities. Many students may not be able to attend live sessions when other students can. Such reasons are as varied as the number of students we have, the least of which is the fact that we may have students living in various time zones. Remember how I mentioned in the last podcast that I have had students from the East Coast to China? But such considerations should not dissuade you from considering synchronous elements -- although I do encourage you to read over the list of pros and con found on page 29. I do not offer synchronous activities every week, but only at the end of my courses, in the last two weeks of class. This does not place a continual burden on those students who cannot allocate such time every week, yet allows everyone weeks of advanced notice to begin making appropriate plans to attend. I limit the number of students in live chats to six, and so I offer several different sessions to accommodate the entire class -- at different times and on different days. The value of live voice sessions has shown that the students really enjoy the experience and would like to see more sessions built into my courses. Do think about creating some yourself. Skype is a very popular "Internet phone" application, and there is no cost for Skype-to-Skype calls and conferences (the company makes its money by offering premium services for people and businesses). The quality can vary, depending on the amount of traffic, time of day, etc. but I have actually had numerous calls that were clearer than my cellular telephone -- including with my student in China. I encourage you to take a look at (spell it out www.s-k-y-p-e-.com) www.skype.com and contact me for more details at dharrison@holyapostles.edu.

Thank you again for listening to this podcast, and I will "see" you in the next module!