Teaching through H1N1 at ECU
September 2009

Ginny Sconiers: If H1N1 leads to the suspension of face to face classes or a large number of absences how can faculty prepare to continue instruction to those students who are well enough to participate?

This is Ginny Sconiers from Academic Outreach and today we will be talking with Tim Kelley, from the college of Health and Human Performance, about his continuity of instruction plan. Tim, thank you for taking the time to talk with us today.

Well our first question for you is what is the name of the course or courses that you have developed your continuity of instruction plan for this semester?

Tim Kelley: Well specifically I can talk about the course which is environmental health sciences 6010, which is an introduction to environmental health for our graduate students, which is what I am teaching this semester online. Really I’m looking at more at a philosophy of structure of teaching that is applied to many of the courses I teach that can then transition into being used for a continuity of instruction.

Ginny Sconiers: So this plan could apply to either distance education or face to face classes?

Tim Kelley: Yes I think so because it is more about like I said the philosophy and structure of the course and how that can be adapted for continuity if instruction.

Ginny Sconiers: How will you communicate your plan with your students in the event that you would need to make that plan active?

Tim Kelley: In an online course using Blackboard it is very easy to communicate with the students and typically I try to use multiple ways of communicating with students. For example I will post something in the announcement or I will also send an individual email, so that if they don’t see it through one venue they will have it through another.

Ginny Sconiers: That probably answers our next question which is how you will communicate with your students.

Tim Kelley: I do a lot of communication with students via email. It is just a very efficient way I think and I am pretty good about responding to emails, I tend to respond very quickly. I know that different people have different feelings about that and different systems that they use, in my case I think it is very efficient. I try to deal with things quickly rather then letting things pile up. Just for me personally it reduces my stress level if I can deal with something immediately rather than putting it on the corner of my desk and creating a pile of things that need to get done at some point.
Ginny Sconiers: And then you are coupling the announcement with the email feature as well on Blackboard?

Tim Kelley: Yes

Ginny Sconiers: What technologies are you currently using to teach? You mentioned Blackboard, obviously email and announcements, are there any others that you would like to mention?

Tim Kelley: Yes, like I said with me the philosophy and related structure is interesting because I have been teaching for about 25 years now. Probably the first eight years or so that I taught I used a very traditional structured course format and used primarily lecture as a way of getting across information to students. I found that that was beginning to get a little stale both for me and the students and so I started to integrate some things like active learning exercises, a more guided discovery. My field is environmental health sciences so our discipline is a problem solving discipline. It is sort of a given that you have the information, anybody can find information it is very easy to find information these days particularly with the internet. But applying that information to a problem solving format to try to deal with environmental health issues related to environmental degradation or public health can be more challenging. So I sort of made that shift, actually over the last eight years or so, I have made a shift almost entirely to an active learning problem solving format for my courses. Again that structure makes it very easy to translate into a continuity of instruction because I provide them for example with outlines for the course materials, they have a text book, and they have links and other documents that they can use for that. Ideally when they walk into class, or perhaps when they are at home, they can actually access the information that they need to address that question. Ideally it would be great if the students could work together in a class room face to face, I think that interaction is important and that social interaction is important part of education. But you can do something very similar, and it is not quite as good in some ways because you don’t have that face to face interaction. But in some ways it can actually be better because they may be able to interact with a larger group of students online for example or via email that where in a classroom they would only be able to interact with one or two other students.

Ginny Sconiers: Can you briefly describe your plan for us?

Tim Kelley: As I mentioned I provide students with an outline of the material, which for me indicates to them what the more important aspects of the material are. Then they have a text to back that up and other resources to back that up, and then I provide them with a problem solving scenario. I might ask them a question, let us say for example related to water quality, the processes that are related to how water is treated for drinking purposes. I might give them a scenario in which they have a contaminated water source or a potentially contaminated water source and ask them to look at the course materials that have been provided, decide what would be an appropriate
treatment for that water to make sure that it is safe or is safe, in the case of waste water, to be released into the environment.

_Ginny Sconiers:_ Well our next question deals with how you developed your plan. And obviously that relates back to your teaching methodology, can you talk to us a little bit more about that?

_Tim Kelley:_ My undergraduate degree is in environmental health, but my Master’s degree is in science education and I have a doctorate in ecology, so diverse background. But when I first started teaching, the science education background focused very much on a highly structured course. Which is very good in some ways, you know it makes it very clear what the objectives are for the course, stated in terms of student performance, what the expectations are for exam questions, very criterion referenced expectations for the course, those types of things. The structure is very good and I have retained a lot of that structure. What I found is that early on in my teaching structure can be overwhelming and can be constractive to the students and to the instructor. So I try to be a little bit more flexible. I try to introduce more flexibility so it is kind of an interesting combination of structure and flexibility which seem to be contradictory but actually can work quite well together. You provide enough structure so that the students feel comfortable, and yet they also have the flexibility to interact more with each other and with the instructor.

_Ginny Sconiers:_ We talked a little before we started our interview this morning and I understand that your continuity of instruction plan is something that you currently employ in your classes for students that are absent. Can you talk a little bit more about that, you know let us say a student comes in today and they know they are going to be out for a week ill. How do you handle that particular situation?

_Tim Kelley:_ Well I give credit, fairly substantial credit, usually about ten percent of the course credit is related to what I call course participation, which I make very clear to the students is not attendance. I give the examples that students, they can show up for class and if they go to sleep in the back of the room, they are there they are attending but they are not participating. Alternatively you can have participation without necessarily being in the classroom. If a student contacts me, and they are required to contact me about this I don’t offer it with out contacting me, if they contact me and say I missed a class I would like to earn those participation points then again I can send them that exercise. I ask them to address those questions with the materials that they have available and at least give them partial credit if not full credit for participation in that particular exercise. Of course again that is not ideal in some circumstances because you wouldn’t want that to be a major part of their experience but it certainly works for a small percentage of their classroom experience.

_Ginny Sconiers:_ I think you have some what answered our next question too which was or is, do you feel that this plan is applicable if classes are not suspended but you
have a large number of absences or maybe you become ill. If not what do you foresee that you would do in either situation?

Tim Kelley: That is a good point I think that the blackboard format provides a good opportunity to sort of plan ahead for these types of things. For example if I were ill I could take a short period of time to sort of establish which questions I wanted posted on which dates and the associated responses, answers and responses, to those questions in case of illness. That would avoid me having to sort of deal with these kinds of issues on an hourly basis or several times a day. I could probably go in maybe once a day or once every two or three days and make sure that it is set up properly. And I think that applies to the students as well. You can increase the flexibility so that they can manage their time better so if they know that they have, for example, one week to respond to something there may be days in that week in which they feel well enough to be able to respond so that if they can plan ahead, and say “I’m feeling better today, I think I will respond to that question a get a little ahead in the course,” then hopefully they will recover beyond that.

Ginny Sconiers: Well we are down to our last question for you today. What advice do you have for someone who is just getting started in developing a plan?

Tim Kelley: I think, again, going back to course structure is very important and this is true for not only continuity of instruction but I think for junior faculty in general. I think that the better structure you have to a course the more comfortable the students are going to be with that course. Particularly if they know that you are a relatively new instructor they may be anticipating problems perhaps which may not occur. But if they see that there is a structure to the course that they can anticipate and understand how they will be evaluated, I think that helps to make them feel little bit better about the course and even more comfortable with the course processes. Again I would also have to balance that with what I was saying earlier about flexibility. I think that there can be too much structure to a course which limits the instructor’s ability to move in different new interesting directions and for the students to contribute in different directions. I see that as one of the major challenges of teaching is to keep classes both online, distance education and face to face, sort of on track without providing so much structure that the students don’t have room for creativity.

Ginny Sconiers: That is it for the questions we have for you today and I appreciate you taking the time to come talk with us about your continuity of instruction plan, we certainly appreciate that. We appreciate your insight into this topic as well, thank you.