# Transcript

Teresa Valais

Hi, I'm Teresa Valais, senior instructional designer with the Faculty Academic Center of Excellence at Towson University. The purpose of the faculty success, higher Ed Conversations Podcast is to engage faculty and conversations to support professional growth with the aim of enhancing faculty and student success. Our conversation today is about considerations when shifting your classroom practice online. Here with us today is Doctor Montana McCormick, associate professor in the Department of Secondary and Middle Education. Professor McCormick is a former middle school and high school teacher and now celebrates her 17th year here at Towson University. Montana finds anything related to literacy riveting, particularly adolescent literacy. The majority of her teaching and research focuses on disciplinary literacy. As such, she has written about science, literacy, math, literacy, social studies, literacy and even sports literacy education. Her current passion center on critical media literacy, the intersection of literacy and social justice. And anti racist literacy instruction. Welcome. It's great to have you with us today, Montana.

Montana McCormick

Thank you. It is really exciting to be here.

Teresa Valais

OK, so we have a lot to learn from. You so let's get started.

Montana McCormick

I'll try to make it salient.

Teresa Valais

OK. Can you tell us a little about yourself and the courses you were teaching online?

Montana McCormick

Yeah, well, my kind of similar signature course is kind of the main focus of both my teaching and research is focused in on. Disciplinary literacy for future middle and high school teachers. It's the second in a two course sequence that all secondary teachers need to have for certification. And I have been teaching this course for over 15 years. It has changed and evolved. I'm constantly revising and, you know, just sometimes we have different standards that come through different assessments that we need to meet, things like that. So it it's constantly changing as well as trying to adjust to what. The current research and practice is telling us.

Teresa Valais

Can you speak to the aims of disciplinary literacy in education? And perhaps give us a. Few examples of actually how you teach middle school and high school teachers on disciplinary literacy across discipline.

Montana McCormick

Yeah, absolutely. It's interesting because when I began teaching, of course, the kind of common terminology was content area literacy. But we've been focusing now on more disciplinary literacy to really think about the reading, writing, thinking and the discourse that is really specific to each discipline. Because if you think about it. Scientists think talk right, make meaning. And what is truth is very different in mathematicians. And so we we think about that so. I work specifically. With pre service, which just means undergraduate. Students who are who are. Getting ready to become middle school. Our high school students in math, science, English, language arts and social studies, so our goal is for these future teachers to consider how to explicitly teach their students. How to read, write and think and talk in that discipline or content area? So in other words, kind of the default is the, you know, kind of classic social studies teacher. Assigning a chapter for the students to read with the questions at the end of the. Chapter there's a. Whole lot of other things we need to consider to support our students. As they read and write in different content areas. So for example, help the math teachers see how their students can translate across a table to a graph. To an equation and back, but then. Also be able to. Explain either in writing or talking how and why they're doing so. And really, this is math literacy, so they really need to think about how they're going to break this down to make it very explicit for their for their students, because it's not going to come naturally to their students. I could go on. And on.

Teresa Valais

Wonderful. So I'm thinking. You were teaching at Towson during COVID, is that right?

Montana McCormick

Yes, yes, I did. I did exactly what everybody did. And went home for that weeks, thinking we were gonna come back, but.

Teresa Valais

To a whole new practice and a whole new way of teaching.

Montana McCormick

Yes, yes, yes.

Teresa Valais

Right. OK. So it's interesting we're talking about you shifting your practice online. So the. And I wanted to. I ask is how was completely shifting your practice? In line in the recent years post COVID different than teaching remotely during COVID.

Montana McCormick

Well, I think during COVID I think we were all dealing with a lot. I remember just panicking at the all the different applications I needed to learn immediately what made it particularly difficult is that when you're teaching an education course, it is not lecture we have to. Model for our students. The types of things that they would do in the classroom, so that was really difficult to. Think about how I would actually make that happen, and I, and I'm still. Working on that.

Teresa Valais

During COVID you didn't have a chance to figure out how to do that, but when you shifted online. Yes has this. Been a process for. You. Yes. So.

Montana McCormick

During COVID, I became clear that I had some permanent health issues. I had to adjust to. Really, permanently teaching synchronously, right? Mostly synchronously online. So I had to think in terms of addressing all the issues that we all struggled with initially and really think about designing inclusive online instruction from the start. And so there is all sorts of different. Practical, pedagogical. All sorts of learning, all sorts of different technologies. So it took a. Lot of thinking in terms of how to adjust my approach. How to think about that modeling that I would normally do in the classroom? How do I, how do I translate that and that and that? And again, I'm still struggling with that and then. Really exploring all the different technology and Ed tech tools that were available and that takes a long time to figure out. Which technological applications are? Going to improve and, you know, change. And grow what I'm doing and what is not and what works and what doesn't it it takes a while.

Teresa Valais

Especially for application, right? So in your, in your modeling and training of pre service or teachers for the future, you want to make sure that the applications you're using. Logically our actual. Teaching applications that can be transferred to practice. So yeah, I see I understand what you're. So let's take a look at the pedagogical considerations. Can you talk about a couple important pedagogical considerations when you decided to shift online?

Montana McCormick

Well, I think everybody who taught during COVID. Understands the very, very hard and classic issue of lack of participation and in really engaging your students that that kind of evolved over time as I've tried different things to see. What would work? Some of the things. That, I've learned, is that particularly after COVID students are very clear about what they think works as a as a virtual learner.

Teresa Valais

Oh, that's great.

Montana McCormick

And so I asked them from the very beginning. It's part of our introductions in the very, very first class is I asked them to identify what works for them. What they need from me, what they need from each other. And I've even learned just this semester to actually. Write those down. So then we have them. They have created their own expectations so that that really helps. And then another thing that I've learned over time. Is to really. Try to be inclusive as possible and try to engage in. Some personal interactions with my students. So for example, I opened up my class 15 minutes early and I wait. And then I can greet the students as they enter into the classroom. As if we were in in the real classroom. And I've learned that it's really important to even take the time, if it even is an extra of 10 or 15 minutes, to really check in with every student, try to connect what they're saying about what's going on in their lives with others. It's just really important for them to understand that I see them. I hear them, I recognize them and I'm truly engaged in their learning and and them as individuals. And that really helps them I hope. Feel like they're in a safe space? I cheat and I take running notes. So if someone says. They're going to get a new puppy. I I write it down so I can check in the next week and ask you know, how how's the new puppy? Things like that. I've also. I thought about this on the ride. I also think it's really important to find a way to be your genuine self. And I think everybody's kind of evolving in that as we as we move into more and more virtual meetings. But as a teacher to really to really show the students my real authentic personality. And that took a while to feel comfortable doing that.

Teresa Valais

So what I hear you folks talking about is that you focus quite a bit on building community, a safe place for learning and kind of setting the tone I think. The interaction part you're modeling for them in the sense that you are personalizing the experience with them. You open up your class 15 minutes early and whoever comes in early gets that opportunity to speaking with you. That that's a a great strategy. A good part of your practice?

Montana McCormick

Well, and I'm sorry to interrupt, but it actually also models what a a good teacher should do is stand in front of in front stand by the. Door as the students enter the class. And greet them personally. This actually helps me learn more about my students because I'm really checking in with each student every time. And it's also it also kind of. I also make sure that they know that if they're not comfortable, they can privately message me and say hey, today I'm feeling really poorly or something like that. I'm going to turn my camera off and. I think that's. Helps with. Us kind of building some mutual respect that I respect what's going on with them and they respect me as an instructor to tell me why they're turning their camera off.

Teresa Valais

You're kind of setting the tone and so. Engagement during instruction.

Montana McCormick

There's pieces of my my face to face pedagogy that I pull into my virtual instruction and that is that I'm just not a lecturer. I'm just not a lecturer person. I want them to actively engage. With whatever we're. Whatever we're trying to learn and and think about and the skills that we are perhaps practicing. But I think everybody has learned by teaching any sort of virtual class that. Not all students are comfortable talking in front of the whole class virtually.

Teresa Valais

How do you pull them out?

Montana McCormick

I I've learned a couple different ways and I think. The classic fix. Is to try small groups. UM and. That definitely helps getting them talking in, in, in small groups, but online it's kind of a little different because I can't look across the classroom and see who's engaged and who's not, who may need some scaffolding and who's not.

Teresa Valais

Tell me some of the.

Montana McCormick

Techniques you. Well, what I what I learned? That's actually kind. Of really neat is that if I give them something. To give them a clear task, but also kind of have them take notes on the the pieces that I want them to be talking. About right and. What's really neat is if you can get them all on one collaborative document, so even if. So I have them. Each small group fills out a graphic organizer about say what they read the the night before. They fill it out, but they can see what other people are doing in other groups, but then I can see what other people are doing. So if. I see as. Kind of a stalled. Graphic organizer.

Teresa Valais

Right.

Montana McCormick

I can switch to that group and see how they're doing and see if they need some support. But what is also really it? Nice benefit of this is then we have kind of a document of our discussion that they can come back to as a. Resource and.

Teresa Valais

All of them in.

Montana McCormick

One place. So I've learned that the guidance that I give them in terms of questions, graphic organizers or ways to document their discussion. And guide their discussion needs to kind of vary. It can't be the same thing every time and that is definitely stretched me as I've looked for new and different kind of technical virtual educational tools to do that we're talking about. Some other practical considerations is that there has always been a line of educators and education, education researchers and teacher educators. Thinking about critical media literacy, meaning, how are we helping our kids be safe, be productive? Be critical and after COVID all of a sudden. All kind of across all different educational, you know, associations, everybody became very aware. Wait, what is going on with our kids in the virtual world? And it really aligned very well with disciplinary literacy. So that became kind of a new direction. That we took. And it's interesting because it kind of goes in kind of two different directions. One being. We need to recognize that our students, particularly adolescents, are have some amazing digital virtual literacies. And though they are not traditional academic literacies or even. Traditional academic writing, spelling, anything we need to recognize the fact that they have very active literacy lives. And so how can we leverage? And use that as a way to bring the students in and think of how our students, virtual and digital lives can translate into the literacy of our own of our own. But then at the same time, kind of in the opposite direction, we also want. To help our students think critically, understand that the algorithms are. Are really tracking them and they can get in what we call an information bubble that there can be some dangerous language, dangerous people, things like that. We don't just talk about that in general. We think about how, for example, my science teacher can help. Their students become better critical consumers of any sort of science, content that comes across in their digital and media lives. And we also really need to recognize. The fact that. People are. Communicating and making meaning in very non traditional ways. And that is. The future is. Is creating and communicating in multimodal ways. They are in, in immersive in like virtual world where they get immediate feedback and things change like moment to moment. And we need to think about how can we help our students. Really navigate that. So they don't become manipulated, but also so that they can master that. Type of literacy to the point where they can be healthy producers of those multimodal texts in the media, in the media world.

Teresa Valais

Critical consumers and healthy producers of content, yes, having to shift into the virtual space and deliver your classes synchronously. What are some important technological considerations that you encountered?

Montana McCormick

Well, it kind of just evolved naturally as I gathered feedback from students as I realized things that I wanted to do. And then I had to search for the technology that would do that. Or I would find technology that would do something very different that I couldn't do in the classroom. So one of the biggest things that students will say over and over in terms of a virtual class is organization. They want very, very clear expectations. They want to know how things are organized, where are the resources. I, you know, just started with trying to really make sure I had a very transparent organization of blackboard and even make sure that I model for the students and show them and tell them how it's organized and where they can find everything again. This happened kind of organically, was that? I started making video kind of screen casted explanations and overviews of assignments.

Teresa Valais

Right.

Montana McCormick

So that they could come back to that if they forgot like I I would do it in class obviously, but. They really liked being able to go back and look at that video and be. Like oh, oh, oh, that's right. That's what she said. Or that's what that means in the directions. Or this is? Where this is going to be?

Teresa Valais

You know why that's important, especially in the virtual space, whether it's synchronous or asynchronous, it goes back to the universal design for learning principle of multiple means of represent. Patient, just because the student can see what you're doing does not mean that they're going to remember what you did. And having that back up or even listening to what you did in the sink and having that visual backup to actually walking through an assignment description, I've seen other faculty use the muddiest point, you know, here was the. But the area. That is the most difficult for students in this part. To get our. Component that we're going to speak about and or in your assessment overall as a large group here was the key point that some students got were tripped up on. And so that. Those type of walkthroughs are really great touch points for learning and informal feedback for your students in your class.

Montana McCormick

And you can and those again happen organically, students. Will communicate to me. I'm really confused about this and I noticed that a lot of students are asking me about a particular part I can create. I can explain it in class but then also create a nice little. Explanation via video.

Teresa Valais

I was wondering if you could talk about some examples of technology that you use for pedagogical purposes that youth students really grabbed onto and even commented were very. Awful in learning.

Montana McCormick

Yeah, I found this. I love this application. It and I and I found some other things similar, but I like this one in particular. It's called satori. I have used professional development money to purchase a. But it's so amazing the way I can gather resources and directions and examples in a very organized fashion. So it's almost like a timeline or almost a first you do this. Second, you consider this. 3rd here are all the things that we did in class because often we have these electronic records of what we did in class so and you can tie in all the different resources. I can say OK you know how you're supposed to. Cite some research. Here go to this. Section right here and here are some examples of. Some of the. Research you can cite and.

Teresa Valais

And you use this for larger projects typically.

Montana McCormick

Yes, yes. And I really like it because I can kind of help them see what kind of step by step. How we've moved to that project? And I and I really like.

Teresa Valais

That a lot. So I wanted to ask you about class activities or practicing activities. That you do in class that you have been able to utilize different applications. So, for example, discussions would be one, right, another one would be how to students collaborate on other activities.

Montana McCormick

One of the things that I think is really, really powerful and I talked about it a little bit before in it. It can be synchronous or async. Yes, but. Having students do some collaborative annotation, whether it be they are instead of the classic reader response, they're responding on a different application where they can read each others responses, or it can be live and synchronous where. People are taking notes about different things right there live and it's amazing to watch and then it becomes this. It becomes this this documentation of this collaborative thinking that we've done and it's been very powerful and it's completely different than what we could do in. The classroom.

Teresa Valais

So the use of social annotation for knowledge building and gaining, yeah.

Montana McCormick

Yes, yes. Oh. There's so many fun different, you know, we can annotate. Videos yes, right. We can annotate web pages, we can annotate a short story together and I can mark certain places where I want them to pause and answer or think about a prompt, and then they can respond to each other and they can see what other people are thinking and.

Teresa Valais

And that helps bring a reflection into the process of. Of learning. OK. So what I wanted to do was. To ask you what kind of final advice would you offer to you faculty who might be considering teaching online?

Montana McCormick

I think making a very clear communication plan for your for our students, make it clear that you're going to give an outline of what is expected for the next week on Blackboard. Every week. I also find different ways other than e-mail, because there's definitely e-mail fatigue. So I found some applications so I can even text quick reminders or they can text me and because I am teaching virtually I. It's a little bit easier. For me to set up a quick conference with them. So making sure that you are you're clear with them, that you're going to answer any sort of query or feedback within 24 hours, that kind of thing and then really think about how you're going to structure the course. Almost think about some sort of like rough routine that you have for your synchronous class and then a clear way and transparent way that you're organizing the content and. Very things make things different and interesting each time and try out new things and let it let it be an exploration for both you and them.

Teresa Valais

That's very good food for thought, so I'm going to give you the last word.

Montana McCormick

I think what's really, really important in a virtual synchronous course is that not only do you have quick and immediate and transparent communication. But also, students give students ways to contribute to class. Other than just talking in front of the large group. There's so many different opportunities beyond just the chat function and there's it. I don't know why they're that virtually students are a little uncomfortable talking in front of the group, but there it really is there. So if you give them some interesting and different ways for them to contribute, maybe just quick ideas of, you know just. It's really important for full participation.

Teresa Valais

For visual collaboration, I've seen teachers use the mural or mural tool, so students who are participating in class aren't necessarily orally participating, but they are actively engaged in learning by inputting information. Into the mural board or working in small groups and and creating something within that board. So that's a very good ad at the very end of this.

Montana McCormick

And I'm trying to. Make it even more multimodal. So for example, find a picture that represents this and post it here, or you know what would be. Something that you know would be important. Can you find a emoticon or something that represents that? So really trying to engage. In a multimodal way. And and that's modeling actually what we're trying. To help the students do with their students.

Teresa Valais

Well, we want to thank you so much for joining us today. Professor Montana, McCormack in our considerations. When shifting your classroom practice online episode, your contributions embody our FACET “by faculty for faculty” tagline and to our audience, we'd like to thank you for tapping into our faculty Success higher Ed Conversations podcast series. The FACET Podcast series generates conversations on important topics that support faculty, professional growth, and student success at Towson University.