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Transforming the Instructional Landscape:

New Forms of Learning Require New Forms of Trust

Themes and Insights: Design-Thinking Summary



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Introduction

The Transforming the Instructional Landscape (TIL) initiative is a major classroom re-design initiative at the University of Toronto, with the goal of developing learning spaces that are accessible, innovative, and effective in addressing the needs of students and instructors. The Innovation Hub has partnered with the Transforming the Instructional Landscape (TIL) initiative to understand the needs of different stakeholders in U of T's learning spaces through empathy-based qualitative research. Designing successful learning spaces requires understanding a complex and changing environment of overlapping user needs. The most recent TIL report outlined the collaborative process involved in building trust among university stakeholders invested in using and improving classroom spaces. Due to the global pandemic, learning had to move outside of the comfort zone offered by the physical classroom.

The abrupt shift to online learning environments due to COVID-19 has surfaced the need for new processes to build trust among stakeholders. While online learning environments afford new opportunities to instructors and students, the transition also reveals discomfort with technologically mediated course delivery, as well as many challenges connected to accessibility and community building. Similarly, instructors and students express practical concerns about how to effectively engage with digital learning spaces in ways that feel personal, enriching, and emotionally comfortable.

This report draws on interviews and focus groups conducted by the TIL team between the winter and summer of 2020. In the winter of 2020, interviews featured the experiences of students, AV technicians, and instructors with content capture technology before the pandemic began. In the summer of 2020, further interviews were conducted with staff providing technological and pedagogical support to instructors on the topic of the transition to online learning. Finally, this report draws on focus groups with students on their experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. This report proceeds from an understanding that the current transition to online learning was not a choice and is accompanied by an unprecedented degree of uncertainty and discomfort. Acknowledging and validating this discomfort is identified as a key concern, but this report also asks: what new forms of trust are needed in these uncertain times?

What We Learned

As the university community navigates a forced transition to online learning, it needs to build new forms of trust. While analyzing our interview data for insights, three key themes emerged in relation to new forms of trust. **Inclusive teaching and learning spaces** describes the new opportunities and challenges that arise as digital technologies become essential in course delivery. **Experience beyond academics** reveals the non-academic factors that contribute to excellence at U of T and how the pandemic is impacting the university experience through stressors on extra-curricular life. Finally, **trust through honesty** identifies the importance of transparent and honest communication, holding space for discomfort, and ensuring stakeholders feel heard.

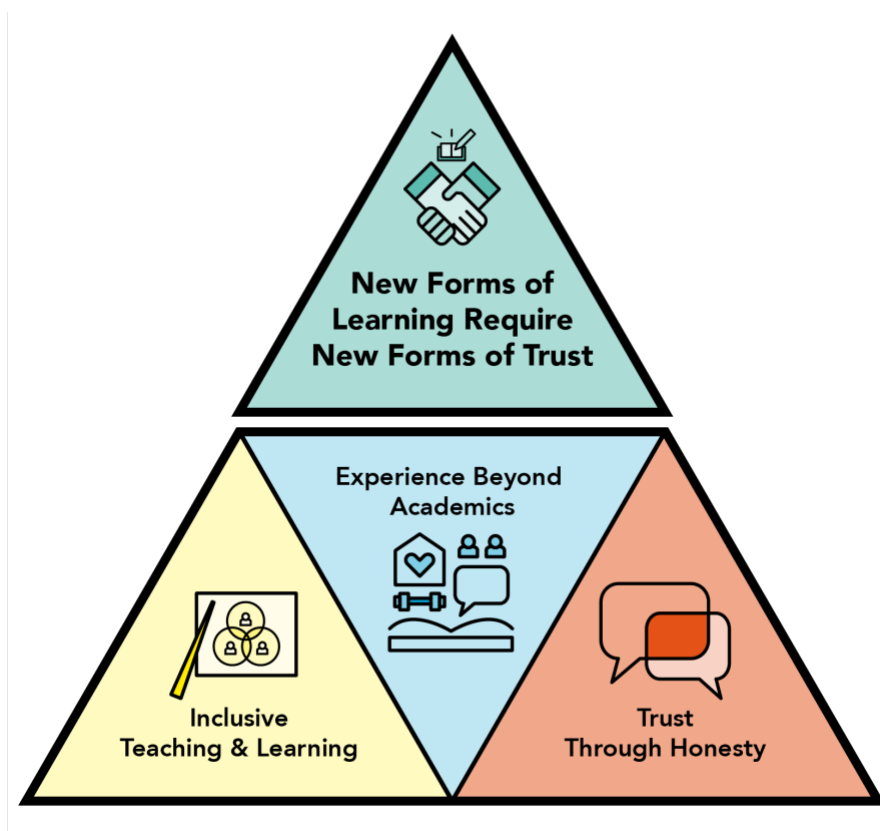
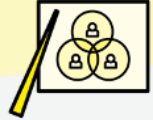


Figure 1. Visualization of themes

Theme One: Inclusive Teaching & Learning Spaces



The transition to online learning means U of T stakeholders must work through a significant degree of uncertainty to establish teaching and learning environments that make instructors and students feel as their individual needs are met.

Online learning raises issues of inclusion, equity, and privacy and heightens the emotional investment that instructors and students bring to learning environments. It raises the question of how new learning spaces can foster new forms of connectivity and trust among university stakeholders.

Course design and the format for information delivery are among the most significant changes brought by the transition to online learning. U of T's ongoing investment in content capture technology for online courses has helped with the transition, offering students the ability to learn at their own pace, on their own schedule, and with audio or visual aids. Cumulatively, content capture technology can accommodate a range of accessibility needs and learning styles:

"Just being able to re-experience the lecture whenever you want to, that's really powerful."

However, the feeling that digital technologies make learning spaces more accessible and inclusive is not universal. The unexpected shift to online learning has blurred separations between activities that formerly took place in different spaces, surfacing new issues of accessibility and equity. Many students, for example, find themselves working in crowded home environments without adequate internet bandwidth. For their part, instructors have been struggling to find ways to foster active learning and student engagement, on top of their own concerns about privacy and the ownership of recorded lectures. These situations are common experiences, which often leave stakeholders feeling like online courses do not offer the equivalent value as in person classes. Experiences of the transition to online learning in the spring and summer of 2020 have only strengthened this perception.

"I had no privacy to do classes so I would sit in this stairwell trying to participate, letting people pass by me while I was trying to have an academic conversation."

"We were forced to self-isolate for like at least 14 days, and the Wi Fi and the internet connection at the isolation location was really terrible... I even couldn't connect with the teaching team since the VPN and internet couldn't support it."

"I feel like it's more impersonal online versus seeing them face to face, and it's harder to form a connection."

"[A] lot of professors are very against recording in lecture, like they have stated that multiple times."

Issues of accessibility illustrate the need to pair technological infrastructure with practices of consistent support and training. Wireless communication requires instructors to be familiar not only with technological platforms like Quercus, but with the AV technicians and the pedagogical support staff who are a crucial component of successful instructional spaces. What support, training, or infrastructure is needed to build trust with instructors so that their teaching style is not constrained by the technology but enhanced by it? What barriers exist to accessing the necessary supports or required technology? How can the U of T community make sure all instructors are aware of the support and resources available to guarantee the excellence of their teaching in a digital space?

"Consistency across departments would be a good place to start. Consistency between the different types of supports."

"I think instructors and faculty are best at focusing on what their teaching style is and the technology should come somewhat as a compliment."

"The quality of the broadcast has to be at the highest standards. So, you know, everything from clarity when they're doing voice delivery, digital video, nothing pixelated...And you have to make sure adequate lighting, microphone pickup, camera placement, all those little items affect the outcome."

"If there's a little glitch and there's like 10 seconds of downtime, it takes me three, four minutes to get this class sort of back on track after that."

The uncertainty and discomfort experienced by students and instructors in online courses is intimately tied to the disruption of familiarity. Instructors who have spent years cultivating excellence in their teaching styles, and in their strategies for student engagement, are suddenly unable to depend on familiar parameters of instructional space. For example, the new mode of online course delivery has fostered concerns about the academic integrity of synchronous exams, which has in turn affected course assessments, creating new grading structures which force students and instructors to adapt accordingly. While the answers to these complex problems are not always near to hand, our focus group data emphasizes the need to hold space for discomfort and to prioritize ongoing consultation with university stakeholders.

“They used to teach with chalk on a blackboard and now they’re being asked to teach online.”

“It has changed the dynamic even more so that I have to be a performer rather than a professor.”

In addition to the challenges of transitioning to working online, digital technology itself has unexpected consequences, such as information overload, shortened attention span, and hindered critical thinking. The current heightened role of technology in learning and student engagement is exposing new vulnerabilities which challenge old routines, educational practices, and established perceptions. Given this forced long-term shift to digital learning, how can the U of T community manage technology-related concerns to ensure inclusive and effective learning in digital spaces?

“When we moved to quarantine I had to look at my screen all the time and... it negatively impacted my sleep schedule because I was trying to do everything at the same time. Trying to multitask takes longer.”

“It's frustrating to be online all the time, you get really tired.”

“Technology [mediated interactions] is harming the ability of students to problem solve. It's harming their ability to really thrive. It's harming our ability as a society, I think, to pursue meaningful and useful solutions to the difficult problem.”

“I want to see the university come up with a deeper understanding of the implications of spending so much time on devices and then appropriately roll out pedagogical approaches.”

While instructors have become flexible in the ways they teach their classes, a key tension remains between the capabilities of synchronous and asynchronous course delivery. How can U of T's courses best balance the inclusivity offered by asynchronous content capture with the interactivity offered by synchronous collaboration? Instructors express fears that students will not properly absorb information through asynchronous classes, but they are also aware that student engagement will diminish in synchronous courses where cameras and mics remain off due to privacy reasons. Most of the stakeholders we talked with, however, still highly value in-person interaction with their peers and instructors.

“I really, really miss the school experience, the actual interactions with other student, interactions with professors, I feel that the quality of remote learning is much, much lower”

“Asynchronous classes give me flexibility, but I also feel like it's harder to stay on track because of that flexibility.”

“Having synchronous classes is really a mechanism to keep you in that course...There's a risk of falling behind if it's asynchronous, and there's so much less motivation to show up.”

Theme Two: Experience Beyond Academics



The transition to online learning has changed the experience of teaching and learning, and has revealed the complex attachments to university spaces, the social networks supporting it, and the vibrancy and diversity of campus communities.

Students note the importance of the university experience beyond academics as a formative component of their education. Whether it is the peer support from informal study groups, recreational activities at campus athletic facilities, or career opportunities that stem from exposure to professional networks, the experiences that make life at U of T fulfilling and unique have changed drastically in recent months. How can the U of T community design digital spaces that continue to foster these informal venues of engagement, recognizing them as a crucial part of the overall U of T experience?

“How am I going to get that same valuable connection that Rotman commerce is so well known for if I’m going to be doing my entire first year online?”

“I feel unmotivated to attend online events because I feel like I can’t create meaningful relationships with people”

“Engaging online is so intentional and so forceful and so explicit. So it’s very unnatural, in a sense, and very awkward for students.”

“I used to meet my social quota by hanging around on campus and seeing who I run into. Since I’m not able to do that anymore I found that my social circle and community really shrunk down to about three people.”

Together with mounting concerns about reduced academic and social supports, students emphasize the significant stresses associated with life uncertainties during the pandemic; financial difficulties, housing insecurity, employment concerns, caregiver responsibilities, and anxieties associated with changing social norms. Holding space for these experiences and their consequences raises questions about the wellbeing of the U of T community and the best way to guarantee it. The pandemic may continue affecting academic performance in the future, which raises questions of how U of T can support its community, potentially beyond mental health resources.

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“One word that's kind of describing how I'm feeling is tired, pretty exhausted”

“My father's stuck in the US and my mom's back home. So we're spread out across three countries and then yeah, just overall a little bit anxious.”

“Everybody's got some anxiety, right? heck, I find grocery shopping stressful when it wasn't a stressful thing before.”

“I feel like there is now a lot of uncertainty in terms of job prospects.”

“People with kids at home, people with any health issues, all these things, it's kind of been framed as your own personal problem that you need to figure out.”

“there needs to be kind of a collective awareness that we're not going to be functioning at whatever normal is, so we need to stop trying to catch up to it and discover something else so we can all survive at minimum””

”

Theme Three: Trust Through Honesty



Building trust requires transparent communication and support between students, instructors, and other university stakeholders. This means holding space for discomfort and vulnerability, as well as delivering clear, concise, and meaningful information. What has become apparent is the need to account for the emotional impacts of the forced transition to online learning on various stakeholders.

With the transition to online learning, ideas about what constitutes a classroom space have changed significantly. Previous work by the TIL team showed that instructors and students had strong attachments to classrooms as physical spaces, thus underscoring the need for transparency for trust-building processes in the classroom redesign. With the transition, stakeholders identify the need to build trust in new ways, and transparency continues to be a significant aspect in it. A major obstacle to this process is the degree of uncertainty experienced not only by students and instructors in relation to the practicalities of learning and teaching in a pandemic, but by decision makers and administrators in relation to fundamental questions about what the university might look like in the months and years ahead. While the answers might not always be there, stakeholders identify the need for clear and consistent lines of communication, even as a means of validating the experience of uncertainty, both from instructors in terms of course expectations, and from administrators in terms of upcoming changes and decision-making processes. U of T stakeholders want to not only feel heard by decision-makers at the University but to see their concerns and experiences in the design and implementation of these new learning spaces.

“Everything is so uncertain and nobody can give you answers. Just nobody knows what's going on”

“I think that it is a lack of clarity and a complete decentralization of accountability to the individual level that I'm finding is the hallmark of the communication between University and grad students.”

“I don't know whoever is in charge of writing the emails for the various administrators if they could [...] kind of get to the point, I think we would all appreciate it”

“With what information we do have, let's make it accessible and not hidden away in a link somewhere.”

“I think it's all about communication. Between the support staff and the instructor. The instructor doesn't need to really know all of the ins and outs of the technology that's behind them really. And same with the students. So there should be a gateway for them to really ask questions and really get quick support when necessary.”

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Conclusion & Next Steps

The COVID-19 pandemic is characterized by ongoing and unpredictable changes to the landscape of higher education. Experiences with technology and with online learning environments are changing rapidly. As university policies evolve, and stakeholders adapt to new instructional spaces, new forms of learning are taking shape. To take stock of this rapidly evolving situation, ongoing consultation with university stakeholders is needed. An iterative consultation process is not only a way to understand the impacts of newly implemented policies, but is a path towards building trust between university stakeholders. Throughout our interviews and focus groups, participants emphasized the value of being heard, and of seeing their experiences represented in decision making processes. They also spoke to the cathartic social value of being able to discuss their experiences of higher education during COVID-19 with others who were experiencing similar things. Creating connections in the focus groups, and in emergent support networks at U of T, has proven to be a valuable resource in its own right. Consultation is thus an important enabler of the forms of trust outlined in this report. It is worth exploring *together*, the new forms of engagement and learning that technology affords.

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