



April 2021

Transforming the Instructional Landscape Pilot Takeaways

Supporting Instructors to Teach Online Courses from Campus

A NEW VISION FOR TRANSFORMING THE INSTRUCTIONAL LANDSCAPE (TIL)

The new vision for Transforming the Instructional Landscape (TIL) takes a holistic approach to the design of learning environments that recognizes the diversity of learners and instructors who contribute to these spaces.

Eight learner-centred design principles are inspired by the healthcare industry's principles of patient-centred care as well as TIL's previously developed principles for classroom design.¹



TIL will be a hub of experimentation, community learning, and collaboration.

WHAT WAS THE PILOT?

The transition to online learning over the last year highlighted challenges associated with teaching in a new, unfamiliar environment.

The pilot was created to support instructors to adopt and experiment with new teaching technologies and modalities. With a focus on improving instructor and student experience and encouraging instructors to use new tools previously outside of their comfort zones, the TIL pilot employed the principles of learner-centered design, developed through qualitative research.²

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF THE PILOT WERE:



Ensuring each instructor's **defined goals and personal approach to teaching** drove the process.



Providing individualized support that recognized emotional stakes.



Empowering instructors and students by **providing immediate access to supports** and creating a **community of learning**.



Accessible by instructors from any discipline and level of comfort with technology

A SPACE FOR SUPPORT AND LEARNING

THE INSTRUCTORS WERE SUPPORTED BY A NETWORK OF PEOPLE:



Technical Co-Pilots:

Partnered with each instructor to provide on-the-ground and in-the-moment personalized support.



Learning Space Management (LSM):

Supported creating and adapting technical plans and room layouts to allow instructors to meet their goals.



The Innovation Hub:

Conducted empathy-based research to understand instructor and student experiences and the impact of the support provided in the pilot.

THE PILOT ALLOWED US TO ZOOM IN AND UNDERSTAND THE NUANCED NEEDS OF INSTRUCTORS.

In doing so, we acknowledged:

- The evolving relationship instructors have with technology, while creating spaces for small-scale experimentation and feedback.
- Personalized support and feedback from co-pilots and a cohort of instructors allowed the LSM team to gauge the effectiveness of technical solutions through a collaborative approach.





TEACHING IS PERSONAL

The instructors in this pilot represented diverse areas of expertise, teaching styles, and comfort levels with technology that shape their personal approach to teaching. The shift to online learning challenged instructors to find ways to adapt their unique approach to a new environment. Many instructors, despite being leaders in their fields, felt overwhelmed navigating unfamiliar technologies alone during this transition. While each instructor experienced the transition differently, they shared a common focus on creating meaningful learning opportunities for their students, despite the challenges.

ADAPTING TO NEW TEACHING ENVIRONMENTS

Transitioning to online teaching was a challenging experience for instructors and students. Many instructors are experts in their field of study and have spent years developing their unique teaching approach. They have also built strong emotional ties to their physical classrooms. The shift online required new teaching strategies and brought new technological challenges, such as unstable internet or poor audio quality. These challenges introduced stress and anxiety. Recognizing the emotional and personal stakes in instructional spaces is essential to designing learner-centered learning spaces.

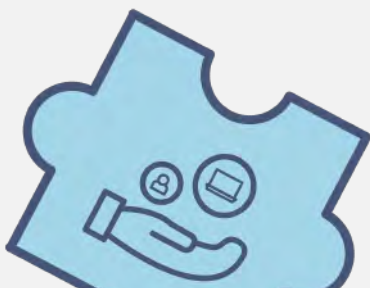
“I think mostly students want something that runs smoothly. So that's what I want. When it doesn't run smoothly, I get stressed, and then my teaching just plummets.”
- Instructor

“I couldn't do it on my own. I would not even try to if I was doing it on my own...”
- Instructor

FOCUSING ON STUDENTS

Instructors cared deeply about their students. While the backgrounds, topic areas and class sizes differed across the instructors in the pilot, all the instructors highlighted improving the student experience as a key goal for the semester. They recognized the challenge of teaching and learning online and wanted to use technology to enhance the student experience, rather than create a barrier to engagement. How can we leverage the technology, personalized support, and the expertise of the instructor to provide students with the most engaging experience possible?

“I want your technology wizardry to make this the best experience for my students as possible and I'll try to keep up with it.”
- Instructor





HUMANIZING SUPPORT

The pilot was able to meet instructors where they were at and personalize the support by listening to instructors' unique needs, goals and teaching approach and matching support and technology to meet these needs. Recognizing the strengths of all involved and ensuring an immediate and adaptive approach to support created a dynamic of trust between the instructors and the Learning Space Management team. This collaborative relationship allowed instructors to truly feel supported.

MEETING INSTRUCTORS WHERE THEY ARE

Instructors told us that they felt listened to during the pilot. Collaborating with instructors to identify their goals allowed LSM team to select technology that matched these goals and their approach to teaching. Providing personalized support changed the way instructors approached technology and viewed support. This personalized approach, which recognized and built upon their current capacities and goal, empowered instructors to enhance their teaching using technology. This change in approach occurred for instructors across the spectrum of comfort level with technology.

“One of the advantages of the co-pilots in this case is they know us, they also know what we're trying to achieve. And we don't have to re-explain it every time. My co-pilot knows me. And he knows I'm different than another instructor.”

- Instructor

PLAYING TO STRENGTHS

Both instructors and co-pilots spoke about the importance of building close working relationships throughout the pilot. The empathy, consistency and understanding of technical co-pilots of each instructor's goals and teaching style facilitated the personalized approach to support and created a relationship of trust. Instructors appreciated that the pilot recognized their expertise while providing support in a collaborative way. Recognizing the strengths and contributions of both the co-pilots and instructors created a sense of shared success.

“It's been really worthwhile... online teaching is something that is new for me, it's not my expertise... having that backup of people who can make sure that the technology is working and get me set up in a way that I can just do my teaching has been terrific.”

- Instructor

IMMEDIATE AND ADAPTIVE SUPPORT

Instructors emphasized the value of having immediate access to personalized support. A hands-on approach provided reassurance and allowed instructors to focus on teaching rather than worrying about technical mishaps. Concerns raised by instructors included problems with audio, video sharing, and lecture recording. Several instructors noted that actions as simple as giving a thumbs-up that everything was working properly allowed instructors to focus on teaching.

“Knowing that there is a supported classroom on campus where I could do this, it is so much of a reassurance, I can't begin to tell you.”

- Instructor

In the future, how can we best provide hands-on resources at a scalable level to benefit more instructors and students? Instructors told us support was most needed in the beginning of the pilot and that they became more comfortable throughout the semester. Is it possible to re-allocate supports and resources as instructors become more comfortable with the technology?



EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EXPERIMENTATION

Experimentation is important for progress. Experimenting with new technologies in new online instructional spaces, however, can be intimidating. To develop a willingness to experiment there needs to be time to become familiar with the technology and dedicated support. Recognizing small wins and tailoring support empowered instructors to try things they may not have otherwise. Doing so enabled instructors to gain confidence with technology.

BUILDING A CONTAINER FOR DISCOMFORT

Throughout the pilot it became apparent that fear of failure sometimes prevented instructors from experimenting or adapting to new technology. The pilot sought to become a container for this discomfort by supporting experimentation and “failure” in ways that would empower instructors. Providing a safety net in the form of a technical co-pilot, who knew the instructor’s goals, plans and technology, reduced the risk associated with implementing new technologies.

RECOGNIZING SMALL WINS

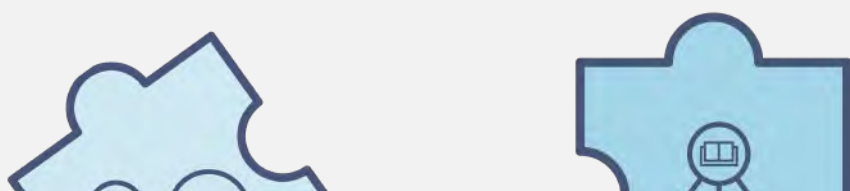
Many instructors initially felt overwhelmed by the new technology before gradually gaining confidence from small successes. Small wins over the pilot varied from seeing more students on screen to getting positive responses to a new microphone. Identifying and validating these “wins” was an important component of support. The gradual introduction of new technology and having time to practice before the beginning of the semester allows instructors to gain familiarity with new tools before they are required to teach with them.

Finding time to become familiar with new tools can be challenging given the busy schedules of instructors, but it is necessary. Throughout the pilot, the most engaged instructors were also the ones who appeared to get the most out of it. In communicating the pilot’s potential benefits, it is important to communicate the time investment necessary to maximize the benefits of participation. It is also important to consider how resources can be made accessible to instructors on an ongoing basis. Instructors who have “graduated” from the pilot program are interested in continued access to pilot technologies and maintaining the associated skills beyond their participation in the program.

“Teaching with a co-pilot means that I’m more willing to try the technological solutions, I wouldn’t be doing it otherwise”
- Instructor

“The fact that my co-pilot had [the new technology] set up and in a way that he can modify it quickly, and he’s there in case something goes wrong. Of course, I’m going to use it. And of course, I’m going to try to experiment.”
- Instructor

“There are so many possibilities that anyone can find one that’s their level of comfort. So, there’s a lot of possibilities. if you’re really good at this you can go really high tech, or you can be a bit more pedestrian, like me, and then work your way up a little bit.”
- Instructor





ENHANCING STUDENT LEARNING

The pilot fostered an exploratory mindset, which provided new understandings of the role that technology can play in instructional spaces. Technology can provide new forms of engagement, such as through chat functions or polls, and improve accessibility for students in different time zones or who learn at different paces through the recorded content. However, the pilot has also indicated the limitations and challenges of technology within different instructional contexts.

TECHNOLOGY AS A PATHWAY TO ENGAGEMENT

Instructors wanted to use technology to make their classes more accessible and to develop new ways of participating and engaging for students. Students told us that, while they missed the in-person connections, they valued the ability to make connections in synchronous classes and enjoyed the use of chat functions and polling in lectures as alternative modes of participation. They also mentioned that high-quality lecture recordings were also essential to the appeal of online courses. Therefore, content capture, captioning, and high-quality recording equipment became essential components of the pilot; however, some instructors suggested recordings negatively affected attendance in synchronous lectures. Understanding the strengths and limitations of technology in different contexts allowed instructors and LSM staff to further consider how technology can enhance or detract from student learning.

“Seeing the instructor, audio/video quality, the ability to ask questions and engaging with interactive tools are the most important to me in an online class.”
- Student

“Recorded lectures are a great way to be able to review information. It gives students the opportunity to go over parts of the lecture and take notes more effectively.”
- Student

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT EXPERIENCES THROUGH ANALYTICS

In online courses, analytics can be a useful tool to help instructors understand how their students engage with course material. Tracking views or time spent on recorded content positively reinforced the effort being put into content capture. Visible metrics also highlighted the use of provided asynchronous material and can act a means to benchmark the impact of future experimentation. Additional analytics that are generated in-course, via zoom polling, also can act as a source of valuable insights for instructors seeking to know more about the experiences of their students. With additional information, instructors can adapt their teaching and course material to better meet the needs of their students.

“I did see how many people have watched the video ... it shows that people were using the videos, it shows that it was more than just the people who skipped class who were trying to watch the video. So I think that shows that it was a good thing.”
- Instructor





ENHANCING STUDENT LEARNING

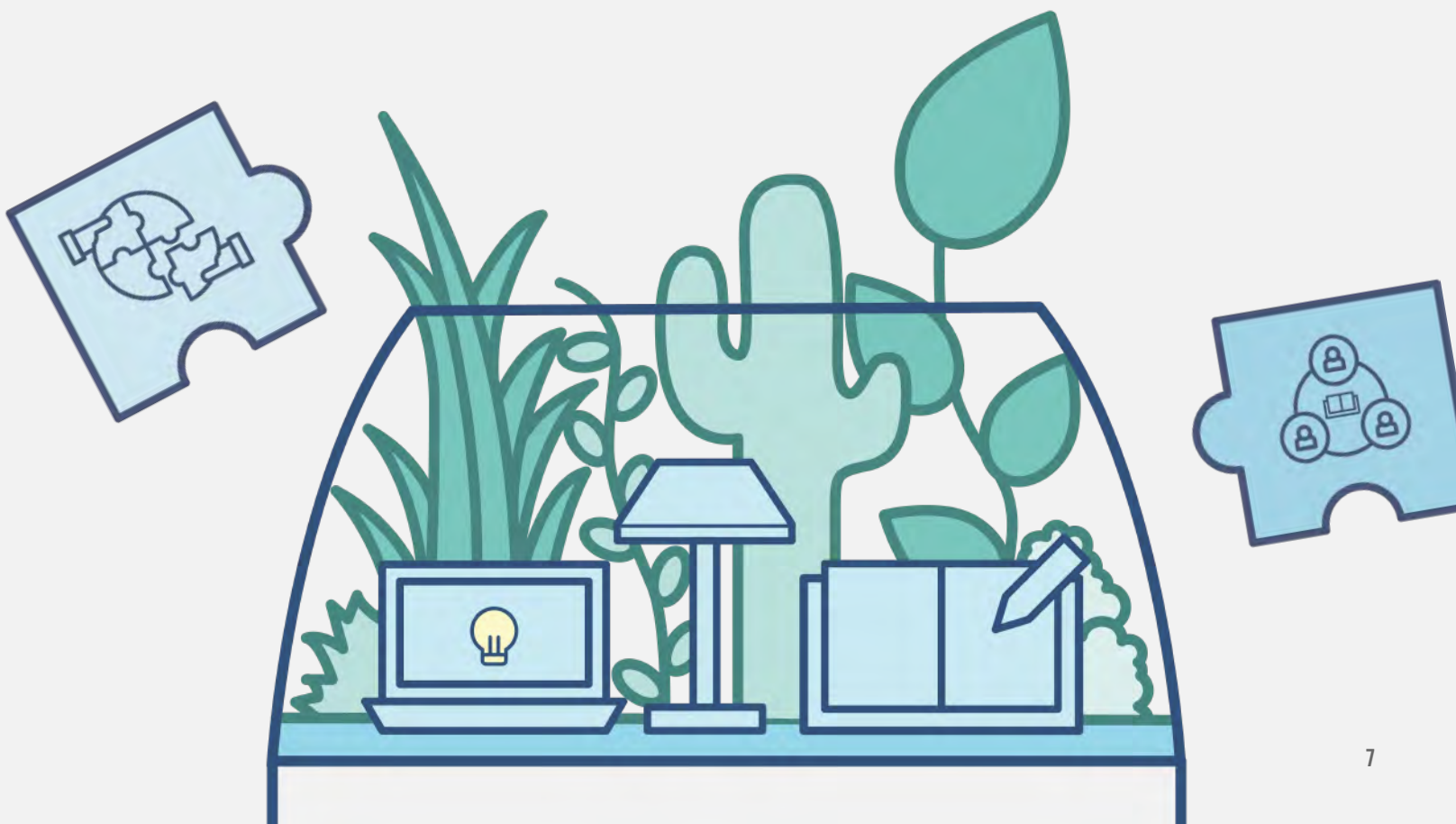
ATTRIBUTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY

While technology cannot replace the experience of being on campus, some students told us that seeing their instructor in a classroom environment felt more authentic than watching their instructor teach from home. Similarly, instructors told us that teaching from a dedicated space on campus significantly improved their outlook on teaching online. Teaching from a classroom gave them more energy, reduced uncertainty with technology, such as with audio and video quality, access to support, and internet connectivity.

The traditional classroom environment is important. We also learned that, to create more authentic experiences for a diverse range of courses, it is not feasible to conduct all of them from a studio space. In the future, how can the technology and support offered in this pilot be mobile to support courses that cannot be taught from designated classrooms?

“Seeing my instructor with good audio quality, the ability to ask questions, and an instructor that encourages students to discuss with cameras on when possible is great. The closer the lecture feels to an in-person seminar, the more I am engaged and excited to be in an online class.”
- Student

“With the help of [my co-pilot], I can see the class, they can see me. It's as close as we're going to get to live to make them feel that they're getting personal attention.”
- Instructor





LEARNING AND GROWING IN COMMUNITY

Teaching online changes what we mean by community in instructional spaces, but it does not change the importance of community. Many students spoke to the importance of connecting with their peers and instructors in improving motivation and facilitating learning within their classes. Instructors and the Learning Space Management team benefited from sharing successes and failures, allowing the community to learn and grow from each other.

LEARNING FROM AND WITH OTHERS

Both instructors and students expressed the importance of building community through conversation with peers. Many students highlighted how connecting with other students and the instructor through conversations or the chat reduced isolation, improved motivation and promoted learning. For the instructors in the pilot, synchronous and asynchronous spaces allowed participants to share best practices, learnings and wins. The pilot's cohort meetings facilitated conversations between participants to connect and learn from the diversity of our cohort members. Instructors also shared that the co-pilots acted as conduits of knowledge, sharing different approaches and success and failures between the different instructors in the pilot.

PROTOTYPING AND LEARNING FROM FAILURE

Facilitating spaces for sharing ideas, opinions, and experiences throughout the pilot allowed LSM staff to understand instructor and student needs. By working directly with instructors to introduce and test new technologies in different contexts, the LSM team was able to understand each solution's benefits and challenges. A collaborative approach enabled LSM to tailor solutions to specific instructor needs in real-time and evaluate approaches before wider implementation. Further, the Innovation Hub's empathy-based interviews allowed deeper insight into the experiences of instructors navigating new technologies and modalities.

In the future, it is important to consider how informal spaces of connection can be fostered amongst students and instructors. How can the pilot effectively create a sense of community across multiple forms of course delivery? Additionally, how can we develop best practices and share key takeaways to benefit the broader UofT community? As Transforming the Instructional Landscape moves forward, it will explore these questions in collaboration with the broader University of Toronto Community.

"I really enjoy having it be a synchronous environment, and I enjoy being able to interact with classmates. Otherwise, it is difficult to find motivation to participate in class, and I can very quickly lose focus. Online class is already very isolating, so anything that reduces that isolation is good."
- Student

"It's also been really helpful to hear the variety of voices in this project, but also more generally, just a reminder of how ... we're different kinds of instructors, we see different things, we prioritize different things."
- Instructor

"We are provided a front row view of the challenges that instructors and students face ... It's through this shared experience and the evolving nature of this pilot that we can test new ideas and technologies in practice before widely implementing changes."
- LSM team member

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CONTRIBUTORS

For more information about Transforming the Instructional Landscape, visit uoft.me/TIL

Philippa Gosine, Senior Research Assistant, Ph.D, Biomedical Engineering

Lucas Chan, Design Researcher, Master of Information, UX Design

Marcus Lomboy, Design Researcher, Master of Public Policy

Nick Smith, Design Researcher, Ph.D., Anthropology

DESIGNED BY

Kaitlyn Corlett, Senior Project Assistant, Master of Education

Ecem Sungur, Communications Specialist, Bachelor of Architecture

For more information, or to work with the Innovation Hub, please contact **Julia Allworth** at julia.allworth@utoronto.ca or **416-978-8619**, or visit our blog at uoft.me/innovationhub

