How I built a 15-week blended learning online writing course for 106 first-year undergraduates using off-the-shelf software in two weeks.

It's not pretty and it's not sophisticated, but it does the job and it's easy to manage.

Trying to keep up with what's being written these days about online and e-learning is like standing in front of a fire hose. People are bewildered, anxious, and feeling overwhelmed. Been there, done that and talk about it in [My 3 Big Mistakes](#)

Take a step back

Online and e-learning was booming before Covid-19. The pandemic sent it into orbit and with it a plethora of advice, horror stories, free offers, and utopian predictions. I have been following the industry since 1985 when all the buzz was about 'computer assisted learning' and I've seen this before.

Don't let it get to you. Keep in mind that online and e-learning starts with basic principles of pedagogy and all this buzz is about a new way of engaging with learners.

A path forward

Here is one pathway that might work for some people. The instructional design experts will howl with indignation, but I had a course I needed to create in a very short time so I went to Mother Necessity.

First things first–and this is critical–write your course before you do anything else. I use this script format in MS Word.

Slide #	Images	Slide content	Narration

Break your course up into lots of small chunks. I call my chunks 'topics'. A topic will translate into a PowerPoint presentation or a video of no more than 10–12 minutes of viewing or listening. A series of topics makes a module, which may have more than one section, each section with topics.

Once you have your course written, copy and paste your text into PowerPoint. What you or your users will read goes in the notes section. Write main points on the slide as short sentences or bullet points. Use minimal formatting and be consistent with fonts, point size, and color. Aim for a minimalist style.

Turn these PowerPoints into lectures. A 'lecture' can be the PowerPoint itself. Tell user to read the notes below the slide. You can go to File/Export and Create Handouts. If you want to go a step further, you can screencast your PowerPoint and turn it into a video lecture. PowerPoint has a simple built in Screen Recording function on the Insert menu or you can go another step further and use a screen recording and video editing tool like Filmora or Camtasia Studio. The latter is a top-of-the-line tool and expensive but there are free tools available.

Curate content. You don't have to reinvent all the wheels. There is a world of content on the World Wide Web and you can use it to construct reading and viewing lists for your users. Curating good content is every bit as valid as creating content from scratch and there are no copyright issues if you are giving users a link to someone else's content. I usually contact the owner and let them know I have directed users to their site. No one has *ever* said 'don't' and I often get a nice email in return saying 'thanks'.

Create practice exercises using MS Word or Excel or whatever. If you don't have a lot of users in your course, you can ask them to email their completed worksheets or upload them to a folder on Google Drive and give individual feedback. I have 106 users in my class so I provide answer keys they can use to compare their responses and give themselves a score. Because this is a university course, I am obliged to grade them, so I give a take-home midterm and final exam. Both are labor intensive grading tasks but it's only twice over the 15 weeks.

Create quizzes with Survey Monkey. The free version of Survey Monkey comes with some limitations on the kind of quizzes you can create, but with a little imagination you can do most of what you would like to do. I use quizzes as feedback to users to help reinforce what I am teaching so I let them do the quiz as many times as they like. If I want to grade them, I limit them to one try.

Store all your materials on Google Drive. You can set up folders to reflect the structure of your course and get links to share with users. They can then go to the folder and download the files they need to view lectures or PowerPoints and do readings and worksheets.

Use Wix to build a user interface. Wix gets a lot of bashing from 'real' designers and I don't disagree with many of their points. **But**. It's just so easy to use. It has a short learning curve, and you can put together a decent user interface without spending a hundred hours caught up in the gears of WordPress or Moodle of some other platform. I use it as a portal for users to access all the materials for the course. The big advantage is if a user reports a problem, you can quickly and easily go into the editor and fix it yourself, sometimes in minutes. Wix is not free but it's not overly expensive.

Excel for student tracking. Yes, it's laborious but it works.

Use MS Teams as a hub. As a learning management system, MS Teams sucks. It's complicated and time consuming and constraining. It was designed as a project management platform and that's how it works best. I use it as a hub for announcements, discussions, feedback and meetings.

Pros and Cons

You might be thinking, "That's a lot of moving parts to keep track of" and yes, it is. I never said it was easy but compared to the hundreds of hours I have spent thrashing around learning WordPress and Camtasia Studio and the hundreds of dollars I have spent on software licenses, books, courses, and so-called expert help, this is a welcome relief.

The main advantage is none of this is especially difficult to learn, a lot it is free, and while it is time consuming it's not difficult to manage and you can spend your time interacting with your users and thinking about content.

Keep calm and carry on

This approach is like wading into a cold ocean up to your knees. It works, but if you are a professional educator you should work toward becoming much more skilled at designing, delivering, and managing your content in online environments. My partner, Bernd Salewski, and I are developing a course designed to give you an overview of the knowledge domains you will need to know something about and how to avoid the most common problems and pitfalls. Let me know you if you are interested.