Transcript: ASC ODE Instructor Spotlight, Dr. Christa Teston

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[TEXT ON SCREEN: The Office of Distance Education in the College of Arts and Sciences presents]

[TEXT ON SCREEN: Instructor Spotlight, July 2024 with Dr. Christa Teston, Department of English]

I am Christa Teston. I'm an associate professor of English. I'm also the vice chair of the writing rhetoric and literacy program.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: Has your opinion of distance education changed throughout your career?]

Well, I don't know if my opinion has changed. I just feel like I maybe have a little bit more experience under my belt at this point, not just because of the pandemic, but also because I took a Drake Institute course focused on designing for online course delivery systems, and that really helped me think through, for example, how to set up my Carmen site in a way that allows for students to make their way through the course in a way that feels natural to them and is thinking about the user experience as opposed to the designer's experience. The pandemic definitely shed new light on that for everybody, but I think for me it also made me start thinking about what else is going on in people's lives when they're taking an online course. You should always be thinking about that no matter what kind of course somebody is in, but in an online course, the student is usually enrolled in that type of a modality because there are constraints on being there in person. In the pandemic, we saw that with people taking care of loved ones who were ill or themselves who were ill, so I'm always trying to be mindful of what's nagging at students' time and energy and just overall sort of intellectual resources. I

don't want to assume that just because I have the system set up in Carmen in a particular way that that guarantees a student is checking in and doing the work in the schedule that I have laid out, so I'm keen to sort of try to turn an online course into something that's as personable as possible.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: What pedagogical strategies have you found to be especially effective online, maybe that you didn't use before when you were teaching in person?]

Well, I think scaffolding is way more important online. Students need to see the logic of where they're starting and where you're asking them to go, and usually in person, you can describe that iteratively when you meet on a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday. You don't have that opportunity to describe that in an online course with that level of detail and consistency, so in the videos you create, in the online communications, in the very design of the headers in Carmen, you have to find ways to slowly and iteratively build in cues for the student about where they're at and where they feel they're heading so that they don't get a sense that they're doing some kind of a quiz or a discussion board for busy work, that this is actually, this discussion board assignment that I'm asking you to complete actually will help you complete writing project number two, so if you skip it, you're kind of not on good footing for starting that project. So I think just sort of being transparent, I guess, more transparent, which is a pedagogical strategy in person too, but even more so online that you really are clear about why this assignment and why now and what it's going to prepare the student to be able to do next.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: What do you see as the greatest potential for online education in the future, as well as some of its affordances?]

I'm still working my way through the implications of trying to teach a course online where I don't have that one-on-one time with students in the classroom, especially when it comes to facilitating collaboration, so most of

the work that I know people do in the workplace right now is inherently collaborative in some way. My partner works for a company where he has to think about his colleagues in Turkey or Brazil or the UK, and so he's thinking about time zones and how that maps onto when he makes a request or sends an email, and I think facilitating opportunities for students to think through the implications of their workflow and their writing practices so that collaboration is more than just the person sitting next to me, I think that's really important, but it can be hard to instill that with undergrads who are taking a ton of different courses involved in social activities, involved in sports, some of whom have families and they are taking care of children or they're taking care of parents or grandparents, so it really is a, you kind of have to walk this tightrope of figuring out how to prepare students for these larger collaborative situations while being mindful of the ways that they're, like I started the interview with, like that their home lives are complex and they don't have to explain how or why they're complex to me. There's a privacy component there, but that acts on them in ways that I don't know instructors are always fully aware of, so when you ask the question, you know, what are the greatest possibilities, I think the affordances and the constraints are... work hand in hand. On the one hand, it makes things more accessible and available to more students, I think, but on the other hand, the assumptions embedded in what availability and what accessibility looks like are a little bit more complex and I think we're always ready to face off with.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: While teaching in the emergence of generative AI and ChatGPT, how may student access to generative AI tools create challenges?]

I'll say from the outset, I'll reveal my cards from the outset that I'm less concerned about what some people would characterize as plagiarism or unethical use. I don't... I tend to try not to start pedagogical problems from the assumption that students are trying to take shortcuts. However, I

recognize that it poses that opportunity, especially with technical and business and professional writing genres. So, as I mentioned at the outset, learning how to write a resume, a grant proposal, a brochure, those are things that students could have googled before ChatGPT. So, I don't know that there's really that much of a difference now, frankly, than what existed pre-ChatGPT or pre-generative AI. I feel like a lot of those resources were at their disposal even prior to gen AI. So, now though, I think because it's clear that industry and professional workplaces outside of academe are probably going to in some way adopt some version or respond in some way to generative AI, we need to have the conversation. So, the first thing I talk about or mention in the memo is that typically these systems are taking your data that you're inputting and using that data to build their own sort of database of potential responses for other users. And so, it's important to be mindful about what you're putting into the prompting space, especially if you're working for like an industry that has trade secrets or proprietary information. You don't want to be putting that into ChatGPT or Microsoft Copilot knowing that that could then be a part of a larger database and you're perhaps revealing things that you shouldn't be revealing. But there are ways that I think students could leverage Microsoft Copilot to help them do their assignments. I think one of the hardest parts about being a writer, if you don't identify as a writer, is just getting started. And so, being able to sort of just put into Microsoft Copilot, how do I structure a creative brief? Give me an example of an abstract for a scientific article. Or how do I write an email that is delivering bad news? Give me an example of how to do that. Having those examples can be creative, can be what we would call in writing studies a heuristic, a sort of model for kicking off your own version of that genre. So, I think it's in the memo we cue to students, here's how you can use ChatGPT or, I'm sorry, Microsoft Copilot. Here's how you can use Microsoft Copilot to start a creative brief, to write an effective resume for a particular profession.

But then we also indicate in the memo it's a first but not final draft. So, it gives you the first iteration of what you might use, but you should never copy and paste that into what you submit. I feel like allowing students or permitting them to use the technology in particular ways allows for some flexibility, encourages them to think critically about when to use a resource and when maybe a resource is not as useful. We also put in a couple of, not warnings, but just be mindful of the ways that if you rely too heavily on generative AI for developing your first, second, third drafts of things, that you can start to sound like everyone else. And then what are the drawbacks of that in particular situations? In some situations, it's good to not sound like you're an individual. It's good to sound very generic and like everyone else might sound. But even just facilitating that conversation I feel like offers an opportunity for students to think more deliberately about what writing is and how all prose making is rhetorical. Whereas before, students might have been attempting to write in ways that are like, this is the right way, this is the wrong way. And so thinking through when to consult Microsoft Copilot or ChatGPT and what are the constraints of those resources, I think facilitates opportunities to talk about the complexity embedded in writing for multiple audiences and through multiple technologies.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: What advice would you give to instructors that are developing an in-person course to be taught online for the first time?]

Well, first I would send them to the Drake Institute to take the online course design. I think they offered it like as a six-week or a 12-week. There's even maybe a summer institute. That was really, really fantastic for me. And I did that when it was UITL before it was the Drake Institute. I think looking at other folks' Carmen shells and syllabi and consulting resources like the one that you're producing here today to listen to real people and consult the experiences they've had is useful. I always try to user test the things that I'm

designing for online delivery. So we have this new reader experience lab in Denny Hall where you can bring folks into this room and watch them interact with something that you've designed. Whether it's a poster, a website, or in our case, it might be a syllabus, an online syllabus. Our writing and information literacy courses that we offer in the English department, they have a series of prompts that inspire students' completion of writing projects. The instructors and the designers of those prompts are curious, though, when students are actually engaging with those prompts, what do they feel like they're being asked to do? Or what do most students think their next steps should be after engaging with the prompt? Until you've had a chance to like sit down with students after they've engaged with those things you've designed, you're kind of like feeling around in the dark and assuming that students know what you're asking them to do, assuming that students know what their next steps should be, but you don't actually have data to indicate that what you've designed is going to result in the thing that you expected. So I guess my recommendation for instructors or course designers, if they're thinking about moving things online, is to set up a couple of test scenarios where you can bring in real students and ask them to give feedback on the syllabus design, the assignment prompts, the usability of the Carmen shell or the Carmen site that you're using. It doesn't have to be anything formal, like a formal user experience test. It could simply be like, hey, I'm bringing some donuts in. Let's sit down for 45 minutes with five students and ask them to navigate this unit I've designed in Carmen for a math class or a social work class and ask them for real-time feedback on what they think they're being asked to do, what they feel like their next steps are, and how things can be improved to increase learning or to increase usability. I think having our fingers on the pulse of how people are actually engaging with things we're designing is probably the best step forward.

[TEXT ON SCREEN: Special Thanks to Christa Teston]

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