KINE4710: Psychology of Health and Chronic Disease (School of Kinesiology and Health Science, Faculty of Health) was offered in the blended format for the first time in Winter 2013 (30% face-to-face; 70% online). Previously, it had been taught face-to-face with Moodle used only for sharing lecture slides and course announcements.

Course director: Dr. Lucia Gagliese, Associate Professor, School of Kinesiology and Health Science

The primary objective of the course is to explore the role of biopsychosocial factors in the experience of health and chronic illness. There is a strong emphasis on the evaluation of various research methodologies. Topics covered include the role of personality and health-related beliefs in illness, the social context of illness, adjustment at various life stages, and the role of psychotherapy in disease management. Several illnesses are examined in-depth, including cancer and chronic pain, and the evidence base for complementary/alternative medicine.

Each week, students receive “guiding slides” to facilitate active learning in navigating the materials, read peer-reviewed empirical and review articles, and watch a lecture/presentation or documentary featuring a leader in that field (such as a TED talk or episode of a program like “Scientific American Frontiers”). Additional materials include patient testimonials/interviews, or blog posts. Other than the “guiding slides” and journal articles accessed through York University, the materials were freely available online, thus respecting copyright issues and also paralleling the experience of most people searching for health-related information online.

There are various formats for online interaction – open discussion fora, closed fora where I provide focused questions that students answer before they see other students’ postings, mini extra credit assignments (for instance, students’ critique a hospital’s patient education videos for accuracy of scientific claims and adherence to criteria for presenting health information in an unbiased way to a general audience), and student-initiated discussion threads. Together, these activities not only meet the objective of learning health psychology but also refine students’ critical thinking skills and develop skills necessary to navigate and evaluate a range of health related information. We also hold chat sessions where the students, TAs and I interact in real time to answer questions about any aspect of the course. During face-to-face sessions, some of the discussion topics were revisited and new materials were presented.

Evaluation was made up of multiple components including participation in the online fora, two assignments, a midterm and the extra-credit tasks. The assignments built further on the materials. For instance, in one, students were asked to write a blog for a general audience based on their choice of the course topics. The assignment was accompanied with resources for how to write a scientifically accurate blog and a comparison of some better and worse examples. This assignment required students to think deeply about the materials so that they could discuss them for a general audience, and introduced them to issues of science journalism that will be of practical use in their futures. Therefore the course engaged the students in the healthy psychology content, but went beyond that to the critical evaluation and production of health-related online materials.
To see Dr. Lucia Gagliese, Associate Professor, School of Kinesiology and Health Science describe her experiences and lessons learned from adapting her course please go to http://youtu.be/VXlbC9S4fFU?t=19m58s