MODR1760, Reasoning about Morality and Values, offered by Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies in both a blended learning and fully online format.

Course director: Dr. Cael Zorn, Contract Faculty, Department of Philosophy

In the blended format, 30% of class time is online, including five in-class lectures replaced with fully online lectures, all homework and assignments are submitted online, and weekly Lecture Participation Assignments are completed online. It is a full-year, first-year undergraduate course. Enrollment is 50 in blended section and 150 in fully online section. The online section has one teaching assistant; the in-class section has none. It is one of many general-education, modes-of-reasoning courses offered at York University. However, it is York’s only fully online, rich-media course and has the distinction of being the second course in Canada to provide lectures in video podcast format. It was awarded the United States Distance Learning Association 2008 Silver Award for Excellence in Distance Learning Teaching (“York Recognized as a Leader in Distance Education,” 2008). It was also nominated for both the 2006 Council of Ontario Universities Award for Excellence in Teaching with Technology, and the 2007 Commonwealth of Learning Excellence in Distance Education Teaching Award for Distance Education Materials.

An interdisciplinary course, it aims to produce effective students and citizens by teaching skills most needed by first-year university students (namely, critical thinking, essay-writing, and reading comprehension) and skills required to participate fully as a citizen of a liberal democracy (namely, critically evaluating what is read or heard, clearly and cogently expressing and supporting one’s views, and rational decision-making). The course design, pedagogy, and choice of course materials takes an anti-domination approach. The issues, topics, cases, examples, and course content, focus on morality and values.

The course is cumulative, skills-based, and multimodular. Module 1 begins by studying argument and argumentation, emphasizing informal fallacies in everyday logic. Module 2 focuses on conceptual analysis. In Module 3 students apply all of the skills that they have learned in the course to short and long passage and issues analysis. The course has weekly homework, one test, and two written assignments. Since this is a skills-based, not a content-based course, the weekly homework plays the important role of providing the opportunity to practice the skills learned in class.

Classes are three hours in length. The first hour and 50 minutes consists of mini-lectures, punctuated with collaborative learning team exercises, with corresponding worksheets that students need to complete. In-class and online students complete the same worksheets. In-class students are divided into learning teams to complete the collaborative learning exercises. Examples of collaborative learning exercises are: viewing a video (DVD or YouTube), discussing, answering questions about it, and collaboratively filling out individual worksheets; listening to pieces of music and applying skills taught in class; completing tasks using skills taught in class and reporting findings as learning teams to the entire class. Dialogue and discussion is video streamed for the online students. The remaining 50 minutes is a workshop session.

The content, technology, and pedagogy have met objectives for essay-writing, critical thinking, and reading comprehension in a fully online, skills-based, student-centered, and reciprocally adaptive learning environment. The design uses student collaboration, video, audio, text, and exercises, which, together with the weekly homework, promote deep learning. The choice of
video streaming, rich-media-capture technology has addressed the problem of how to teach skills and practices fully online while enabling modeling, coaching, and mentoring of behaviors and practices (e.g., argument and conceptual analysis). These enabling objectives are met by capturing and synchronizing: (a) PowerPoint slides containing examples, steps, strategies, techniques, and concepts involved with the skills; (b) document camera projector images depicting the practice of work in progress; and (c) the Internet as a resource (e.g., databases, video clips).

The choice of video-streamed lectures, video and audio podcast format, and a Moodle Learning Management System has addressed the challenges of York University as a commuter campus and the students' need for mobile learning. Moodle has met the need for a fully online learning environment, delivering the course in an enactive and student-centered format, including real-time chat rooms, a virtual office, discussion rooms, nonlinear, user-friendly interface, video welcome messages, private learning teams, coaching/mentoring videos, and Ombuds Buddies (student volunteers who pass on student concerns, suggestions, etc.,) that allow for formative evaluation and enable the course to evolve and change while it is in progress creating a reciprocally adaptive learning environment in which students feel comfortable voicing concerns.

To see Dr. Cael Zorn, Contract Faculty, Department of Philosophy describe her experiences with adapting her course format and lessons learned go to http://youtu.be/VXlbC9S4fFU?t=35m12s