

## Narrative Reflection, Fall 2020 Benjamin V. Holt

The events of 2020 have affected all of us in ways which would have been unthinkable in March. How the events of this year will ripple through time and our consciousness will likely not be fully understood for years to come. In light of all of this, I am grateful for the technological solutions the age we live in provides us. I am also grateful for the skills that I have acquired in both my formal training in online education and my experience here at Southwestern.

Below are my takeaways for what went well in Fall 2020, where I can improve, and what the future holds for my courses in these new times we are living in.

### What Went Well

**Continued Success with Course Survey Response Rates:** In line with my vastly improved response rates for my summer section of MTH 105, my response rates this term were also excellent in comparison to terms preceding the summer 2020 term.

**MTH 81:** First of all, I will say that I love teaching this course. It is incredibly satisfying sharing knowledge and skills that I believe will truly help these students to become better culinary professionals. This being said, MTH 81 is a difficult course to teach since culinary students come to the table with a different skill set and mindset than a “typical” student pursuing an academic degree. On the whole, MTH 81 students need more guidance when it comes to basic academic skills such as how to study and how to write a paper.

This term was the first time I taught this course online. However, there were several elements of the course which remained entirely or nearly unchanged. For example, even in my face-to-face sections, students completed homework online using my website. Written work such as projects and problems of the week (POWs) required little modification, and I was very flexible about how students turned in this kind of work. For example, for written problems of the week, students had the option of turning in the assignment as a PDF, a word document, a photo of their hand-written work, or some combination of these.

The place where the online version of the course differed substantially is in the lecture/collaborative components. In my face-to-face courses we worked on problems together as a group after lecture. The usual collaborative aspect of this course was missing in the online setting. The bright side to all of this, however, is that culinary students by the nature of their program must meet in a face-to-face setting. Thus, the community of the course is almost innately built in; students will help one another learn the material. Although course content was delivered asynchronously, there were students who appreciated the videos and the effort I put into them to make them engaging and interesting.

In the written feedback I was very pleased to see that many of my culinary students thought the course was well done, and I was very appreciative of their acknowledgment of the difficulty posed to all by the pandemic.

**MTH 243 (2 Sections):** In contrast to some of my other courses, I can say that I have acquired some substantial experience teaching MTH 243 at Southwestern. At this point I feel confident in saying that I am finally in a position where I can begin thinking about fine tuning instead of trying to figure out the broad strokes. My reviews for this course have been consistently positive in both the face-to-face and online settings. Moreover, my experience teaching this course online has made the transition to online instruction substantially easier.

I am very pleased with the level of effort students put into the course and how they have received it with an open mind. The points my students addressed which I was very pleased to hear are:

1. Students were pleasantly surprised at how successful they could be in the course.
2. I am very available either by email or ZOOM.
3. The course was well-designed and its materials were easy to find and access.

**MTH 251:** There is no comparison to the previous time I taught this course since I used a flipped classroom model in 2019. However, the pandemic has given me the chance to do something I wish I had been able to do in Fall 2019: create my own set of videos for the MTH 251/252/253 sequence. I cannot say these videos have been met with universal acclaim, however, the feedback from students that I have received about them is generally positive. One student told me that although my videos are substantially longer than the other videos which I had used exclusively in Fall 2019 (I provided access to both sets of videos this term), they are much better at actually preparing students for the homework.

I am happy with this investment of time as it will prove very useful for teaching this course in the future no matter what model I am able to use, flipped or otherwise.

### **Where To Improve**

**Numerical Feedback:** For my MTH 251 and MTH 81 courses, the numerical feedback did not compare favorably with the department as a whole. Although the most common scores (the mode) for each item in each course is 4 or 5, other measures of center (mean and median) indicate a contingent of students who were dissatisfied.

For my culinary students it is less of a surprise since it is well known that these students need help understanding the value of this course to their ambitions of becoming culinary professionals. Again, these students come to the table with different skills than students pursuing academic degrees. Thus, on the whole, these students tend to be harder to please. Also, I tend to get less specific written feedback from these students. With the above in mind, I will continue my efforts to make the course into something these students find valuable and useful to their aspirations.

On the other hand, I was quite dismayed by the numerical feedback this term given the success I had with MTH 253. I put so much time and effort this term into being available for all my students, but clearly this wasn't enough. I suspect that some of these students simply weren't

prepared for the workload. In earlier mathematics courses it is much easier to “plug-and-chug” one’s way through. Calculus demands a renewed level of commitment that many students are not prepared for, despite having passed MTH 111 and MTH 112. The bright side of all of this is that several students in my MTH 251 course gave very useful written feedback (thanks to increased response rates) which I believe will be quite helpful in improving the course. This is my main concern. By taking care of this, the numerical indices will follow suit. I will address the specifics of the above-mentioned written feedback below.

**MTH 81:** Looking back at an earlier narrative reflection for this course, I mentioned that a particular class of culinary students needed more structure. After this term, especially online setting, I believe can say that culinary students in general need more structure. This term and in previous terms, I would give an entire group of online homework assignments a common due date. This was to allow flexibility in completing the assignments for the different schedules of culinary students; some already work long hours in the food service industry. With this in mind, it is my experience that most culinary students try to do all of the assignments the night before. To remedy this situation, I may consider posting a deadline for each assignment in order to motivate these students to stay on track.

**MTH 243 (2 Sections):** There were some places where I might have set up myLakerLink better. In particular, some students have mentioned that discussion forums can catch them off guard sometimes if they are not paying attention. (This seems to be true in my MTH 251 course as well). Also, I may need to reset some due dates. In particular, one student mentioned that it would be better to make POWs (problems of the week) due on Sunday evenings.

**MTH 251:** Every instructor with even a little experience knows that every crop of students is different and has their own distinct temperament. This year’s group is no exception. Moreover, this year has brought major, unprecedented changes by requiring us to move to an online format. Thus, comparing this year’s online section to the previous year’s face-to-face section to understand is a murky proposition at best. It is my conclusion that in this online setting, previous experience is not as helpful in how to proceed; it was like teaching the course again for the first time.

With the above being said, my students have given me written feedback which I will use for the next term when I teach MTH 252. Issues which stand out to me are:

1. **Homework:** Students disliked the way the homework was set up. Each assignment was written with one randomly graded problem out of a problem set of around 15 or 20 problems.

The major complaints were that homework was too long, and there was not enough feedback with one randomly graded problem. Students want more guidance and a more representative subset of their assignment graded.

2. **Video Format:** I hosted the lecture videos on my course website using an open format which firefox will play (google chrome will also play this format). However, according to one student, navigating the video in the browser was clumsy and difficult. A student expressed that hosting the videos on YouTube would work much better for them. (This is something I considered doing at the start but opted not to in order to minimize the number of required

sites to use.) I suspect that other students feel this way too. (Another student in one of my MTH 243 sections also mentioned this.)

3. **Office Hours:** Some students complained that I only had an 8 am office hour. While this is not true statement (I had office hours from 8:00 am-9:30 am MTWF and 4-4:30 MTWR with many students in all of my sections taking advantage), I feel that I could have done a better job a making sure that students were aware of these office hours.

## What Lies Ahead

**myOpenMath:** The biggest change that I will be making in the next term will be trying myOpenMath as an alternative to both my own website and having students submit written work. Although I will continue using `holt.blue` for online homework for most of my courses, it is with my calculus courses (both MTH 241 and MTH 251/252/253) that my students have clamored for alternatives to what I have tried so far. In an effort to maintain the free and open nature of the resources I use, I have opted to try myOpenMath which seems to fit well with what my calculus students have asked for.

**YouTube:** Another big change I intend to make is to host my videos on YouTube. My hesitation to do this was rooted in trying to minimize the number of websites students must use in my courses. However, the benefits (as ascertained by student feedback) seem to far outweigh the disadvantages: YouTube is more accessible and easier for students to navigate and use. Moreover, most students are quite familiar with and use YouTube in the first place which addresses my initial concern of “too many websites.” Thus, in the name of accessibility and student demand, I shall adopt YouTube as the site on which I will host my course videos.

**myLakerLink** I will continue my efforts to more seamlessly integrate my own online resources (`holt.blue`) with myLakerLink. Furthermore, I will try to do a better job of utilizing myLakerLink to make access to office hours easier and more intuitive. In particular, I will add the join URLs to all my regular ZOOM office hour meetings to all the landing pages in myLakerLink.

**Better Advertising for Virtual Office Hours:** Although I was very available last term (every weekday I was available between 1.5 and 2 hours), I will make more of an effort to make these times known to my students. In previous terms I informed students that all of my office hours (regardless of the course) were available to all of my students. I believe that this is where the disconnect lies; this vital piece of information got lost in the shuffle for a lot of students. In retrospect, this was one of my biggest failures of this term.<sup>1</sup> In coming terms, I will post ZOOM links to ALL my office hours on the landing page of ALL of the myLakerLink landing pages for ALL of my courses.

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<sup>1</sup>“The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.”