Transforming the Instructional Landscape

Learner-Centered Design

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

ACE Academic and Campus Events

Transforming the Instructional Landscape
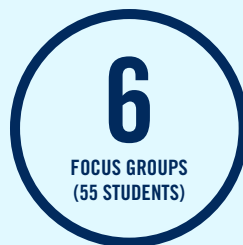https://ace.utoronto.ca/til/

CTSI

INNOVATION HUB

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS TRANSFORMING THE INSTRUCTIONAL LANDSCAPE (TIL)?

Transforming the Instructional Landscape (TIL) is a major classroom re-design initiative at the University of Toronto with the goal of developing learning spaces that are accessible, innovative, and effective in addressing the needs of students and instructors.

OVER THE PAST 4 YEARS...

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

94 INTERVIEWS

6 EVENTS

25 CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

6 FOCUS GROUPS (55 STUDENTS)

IMPACT TO-DATE

5138 SEATS

93 CLASSROOMS REDESIGNED

556 EMAILS SENT

6 DIVISIONS INVOLVED

In the three most recent reports, TIL has proposed design principles[1] which reflect the importance of connectivity and trust in instructional spaces. Most recently, the summer 2020 report highlighted the new forms of trust that need to be built as digital technologies become essential in course delivery.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the integration of digital technology, introducing discomfort into previously familiar spaces. The TIL project has accordingly shifted to focus on the emerging needs of stakeholders and their experiences of these new instructional spaces.

Spaces of discomfort instigate change within the instructional landscape. Growth resulting from these forced adaptations is dependent on community supports and structures. Drawing on qualitative research collected over July and August 2020 allows us to document adaptations made in response to evolving learning spaces during the pandemic. This report poses the question: **How might the University of Toronto design a supportive environment for trial and error that leads to transformation in teaching and learning spaces?**
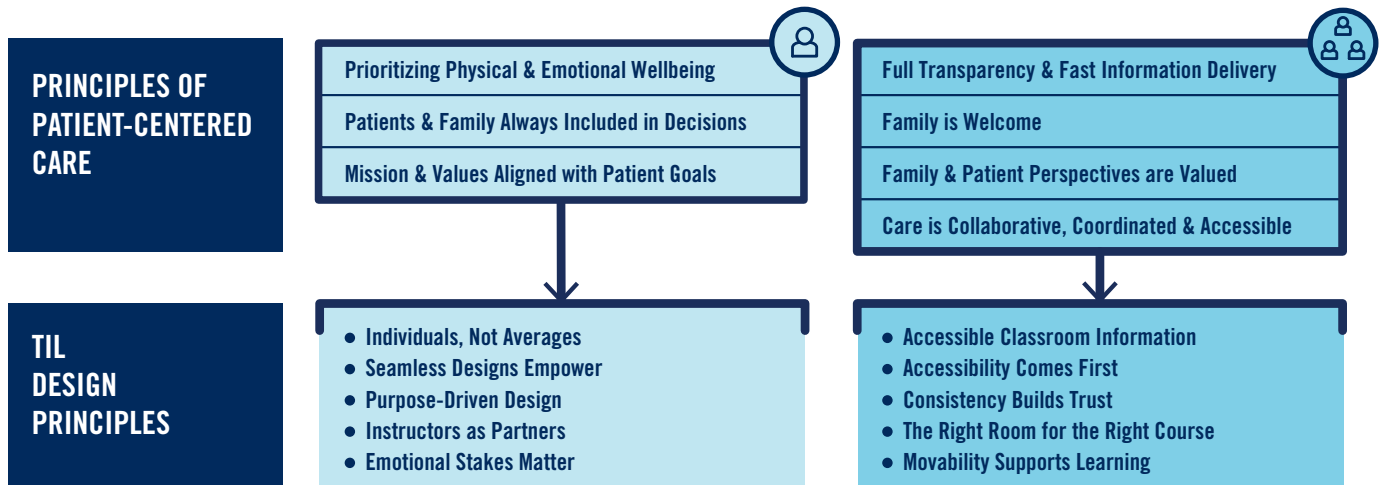
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[1]Recent TIL reports:
  Innovation Hub. (2020). Transforming the Instructional Landscape. Transforming the Instructional Landscape. New Forms of Learning Require New Forms of Trust. Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary.
  Innovation Hub. (2020). Transforming the Instructional Landscape. Becoming Trusted Partners in Classroom Re-design. Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary.
  Innovation Hub. (2019). Transforming the Instructional Landscape. Themes and insights: Design Thinking Summary.

THE INSTRUCTIONAL LANDSCAPE TRANSFORMED

Over the last 30 years, there has been a gradual shift in education toward learner-centered models, where students are recognized as partners in the transformation of the instructional landscape. Learner-centered education focuses on "what the student is learning, whether the student is retaining and applying the learning, and how current learning positions the student for future learning"[2]. Similar shifts in the healthcare industry are seen with patient-centered care[3], where the patient becomes a partner in the healthcare process.

PRINCIPLES OF PATIENT-CENTERED CARE

- Prioritizing Physical & Emotional Wellbeing
- Patients & Family Always Included in Decisions
- Mission & Values Aligned with Patient Goals

- Full Transparency & Fast Information Delivery
- Family is Welcome
- Family & Patient Perspectives are Valued
- Care is Collaborative, Coordinated & Accessible

TIL DESIGN PRINCIPLES

- Individuals, Not Averages
- Seamless Designs Empower
- Purpose-Driven Design
- Instructors as Partners
- Emotional Stakes Matter

- Accessible Classroom Information
- Accessibility Comes First
- Consistency Builds Trust
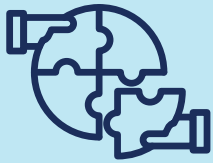- The Right Room for the Right Course
- Movability Supports Learning

We want to consider not just pedagogy but the complete learning environment with a learner-centred lens, including learning space and the diversity of learners who give meaning to this space (students, instructors, support staff and administrators). Drawing inspiration from the principles of patient-centered care, in combination with TIL's principles for classroom design, we developed 8 principles of learner-centered design.

LEARNER-CENTERED DESIGN PRINCIPLES:

- Personalized Approach
- Recognize Emotional Stakes
- Transparent Communication
- Build Community by Learning Together
- Instructor & Student Empowerment
- Autonomy in Teaching & Learning
- Connections to UofT Supports
- Education is Collaborative & Accessible

[2]Weimer, M. (2002). Learner-centered teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice. ProQuest Ebook Central
https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca
[3]NEJM Catalyst (2017). What is Patient-Centered Care? https://catalyst.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/CAT.17.0559

PERSONALIZED APPROACH

Within every experience that is designed for a collective, there is individual deviance. The shift to remote learning has heightened individual deviance and produced diverse home teaching and learning environments, including differences in available space, caregiving responsibilities, time zones and access to technology. Being responsive to this deviance is the basis of growth in personal learning spaces. Our data shows that this responsiveness comes in many forms, including flexible course delivery and assessment methods, re-evaluation of accommodation needs to address the new forms of learning, and methods of engagement that reduce technical barriers and privacy concerns of online learning environments.

> "
> I think the minute we acknowledge that it's a personal experience, we can then start to move away from some pretty strongly held opinions about location and whatever, and we can start to engage in people.

RECOGNIZE EMOTIONAL STAKES

Individuals experience learning spaces along continuums of comfort that range from feelings of empowerment to those of discomfort. In our interviews these emotional stakes assume different forms. Students express feelings of detachment and loneliness due to self-isolation measures, as well as mental fatigue and anxiety in online classrooms. Many instructors have reimagined their teaching methods using unfamiliar technology, bringing up feelings of vulnerability, uncertainty, and frustration. These experiences underscore the extent to which transitions online are not simply logistical and technological challenges but are also emotional endeavours.

> "
> People are treating this like it's a technical and training ... And I actually really see it as an emotional challenge ... [the shift to remote teaching is] making people who are experts, world leaders, feel like they don't know how to do anything, and I think it's just deeply uncomfortable.

> "
> … it's very difficult for faculty to let go of their lab and the importance of the lab experience because it's foundational to their identity, frankly, as instructors and their lived experience..

INSTRUCTOR & STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

Growth is possible in situations of uncertainty and distress but is contingent on individuals feeling supported holistically while being empowered to venture into uncertainty. Some learners appreciate the affordances of new learning environments, such as the ability to work from home. Instructors who had previously relied on in-person exams are exploring lower-stakes alternatives that provide students with multiple ways to demonstrate their learning and the use of authentic and powerful assessments, carefully scaffolded through several small assignments. In our data, a consistent trend of discomfort with unfamiliar technology and spaces was countered by examples like this, where support empowersstudents and instructors to adapt to newinstructional environments.

> Instructors who have never even considered teaching online before, who've been teaching for a very long time, who have said things like 'this was a really cool thing to do. I'm going to keep doing this even when I can go back in the classroom', so maybe not intending to teach fully online when they're able to go back into the course but leveraging some of the techniques and technologies that they've learned about.

> I was against working from home and I had ruled it out from day one because I always have concerns with accessing remote servers…But once I was forced, I noticed for the first time my life is actually pretty sweet. And I told my supervisor, I won't come back till September.

AUTONOMY IN TEACHING & LEARNING

Our data demonstrates that individual empowerment, gained through the freedom to make decisions regarding teaching or learning, is integral to successful outcomes. Rather than conceiving educational design as a top-down process, autonomy underscores the fact that learners can meet their own needs when they are given the tools to do so. Online delivery has the potential to increase autonomy for students in terms of the location, timing and pace of learning through flexibility in course delivery models. When the right supports are available, new tools and technology can leverage autonomy to enable instructors to design instructional space in a manner that suits their unique style, needs and goals.

> The overwhelming questions are about tools. You know...like 'I normally do this in my class, how can I do this in the online environment?'… That question always leads to a really rich conversation around 'what are you trying to accomplish and why?' And maybe, we can think of alternatives given the online environment.

TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION

Instructors and students rely on clear and open channels of communication in situations of uncertainty. In the transition online, communication about policy, best practices, and a constantly changing situation on the ground dictate the ability to plan next steps and engage with instructional spaces. But this information has not always been available and when it has been, it has not always been accessible to learners navigating the highly decentralized institutional setting at the U of T. Ambiguity and misinformation prevent instructors and students from developing effective strategies to alleviate discomfort and adapt to uncertain conditions. Transparent communication, on the other hand, establishes trust that enables learners to feel supported in shifting instructional spaces.

> " The online environment really brings home the need for clarity and the need for navigation tools for their students and the need for simplicity in messaging.

BUILD COMMUNITY BY LEARNING TOGETHER

A community-oriented approach, where instructors can share successes and learn from others' failures, allows stakeholders to benefit from collective experience and networks of support. Forced or unintentional spaces of discomfort place the onus on students and instructors to adapt in relative isolation. But as our data from the transition online demonstrates, this state of isolation has not prevented people from seeking out community. The practice of students self-organizing to create their own learning spaces online is a prime example of the ways that success in instructional space continues to depend on communities of learners. As we heard from support staff, communities are also forming amongst instructors, who are learning from other instructors about what has or has not worked in new classroom spaces.

> " I think having that information sharing from other faculty was really helpful in getting people thinking about how they would want to do things in their own course, and then they can come to our resources for more in detail guidance on how they might want to implement it..

> " I think study hub as a community has been really great... [it] helped me be more productive. I wouldn't have been able to do my deadlines, if it was not for study hub.

CONNECTIONS TO UofT SUPPORTS

The need for instructors to engage with community supports has been exacerbated by the forced discomfort of transitioning to remote teaching. During this transition, stakeholders have been forced to make use of unfamiliar resources. The technological and pedagogical support staff we interviewed spoke to the difficulty of translating physical teaching resources and teaching styles to online environments. Students talked about the value of remote access to mental health supports, online office hours, and email communication with registrars, academic advisors, instructors, accessibility services and other supports. Having supports accessible to instructors and students enables them to alleviate some of the challenges of online learning according to their unique needs and experiences.

> " And the challenging things we're hearing from faculty is mostly just because they're overwhelmed. You know, they've never taught online... Well, there's an awful lot for somebody that's brand new, whether they're new to teaching or new to online, it can be pretty overwhelming.
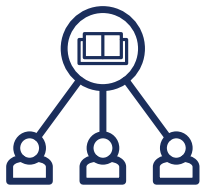
EDUCATION IS COLLABORATIVE AND ACCESSIBLE

U of T is a highly decentralized institution, with educational experiences and access to supports varying across departments and faculties. In the transition online, instructors and students have been forced to navigate institutional channels in relative isolation. Inconsistency across available communication channels contributes to heightened levels of stressamongst instructors and students. Our data makes clear that effective transitions to remote teaching and learning are enabled by the accessibility of information and supports, and the degree to which they are coordinated across different university institutions. Education needs to be thought of as collaborative (between stakeholders and across disciplinary specific supports) and accessible (easy to access the supports you need) no matter the department or role.

> " I think that it's just this lack of clarity and this complete decentralization of accountability to the individual level that I'm finding is the hallmark of the communication between University and grad students.

A NEW VISION FOR TIL

The transition to online learning has made clear that growth and innovation are possible within spaces of discomfort. Over the last 8 months, the U of T community has negotiated discomfort imposed by the pandemic.

As new instructional spaces take shape in these states of discomfort, the TIL project is changing to meet our community where it is at.

Using the **principles of learner-centred design** outlined above, TIL can become an incubator for teaching and learning spaces. In facilitating a safe space for trial and error in the conceptualization and design of instructional space and methods, TIL will serve as a centre for community learning and collaboration, turning experimentation into innovation in emerging instructional landscapes.

Transforming the Instructional Landscape

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