

Transparent by Design: Collaborating to Build a Reflective Faculty Development Program to Enhance Online Teaching

By Susanna Calkins, Jonathan Diehl, Victoria Getis, Michelle Guittar, Reba-Anna Lee, and James Stachowiak

We describe a three-week intensive and innovative faculty development program, necessitated by the 2020 pandemic, which was designed as a deliberative and purposeful initiative to help instructors make the rapid transition to remote teaching. The program, referred to as the Practicum on the Foundations of Teaching Online, was created as a collaborative endeavor by our five distinct campus units—Teaching and Learning Technologies, Distance Learning in the School of Professional Studies, the University Libraries, the Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching, and AccessibleNU. Transparency was a fundamental tenet of this program, pervading all aspects of its intention, design and implementation, with a focus on transformation and meaning-making for our participants.

TRANSPARENCY AS A CONSTRUCT has long been understood as a critical component of effective teaching and curricular design (Biggs, 2003). Being intentional about instructional and pedagogical choices, communicating clear rationales and explanations around those choices, and making the implicit explicit can promote self-regulated learning (Balloo, 2018), improve learning outcomes (Winkelmes, 2013; Winkelmes, 2016), allow learners to construct their own meaning (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2018), and foster inclusive and equitable learning environments (Howard et al., 2020). At the same time, the concept of transparency has been critiqued. For example, Bearman and Ajjawi (2018) argue that transparency, particularly as it relates to assessment, is (1) not truly achievable, since not all knowledge can be expressed, made visible or measured, and (2) not neutral, because transparency “controls how students see knowledge” and as such can be a means to “control teachers and teaching” (pp. 3–4). Therefore, transparency as a value or virtue should not be taken for granted. Balloo (2018) has also noted that transparency has the potential to be transactional (“I’ll tell you what to do and you’ll do it.”), rather than transformative (“Let me help you make meaning for yourself.”), if students and teachers are not given the opportunity to manage their own learning and teaching.

In this article, we describe a three-week inten-

sive and innovative faculty development program, for which transparency was a fundamental tenet, pervading all aspects of its intention, design and implementation as we helped participants make meaning for themselves. Our use of transparent design was intended to foster transformative experiences for our participants, as opposed to being merely transactional. Created as a collaborative endeavor by our five distinct campus units—Teaching and Learning Technologies, Distance Learning in the School of Professional Studies, the University Libraries, the Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching, and AccessibleNU—the program, referred to as the Practicum on the Foundations of Teaching Online, was designed as a deliberative and purposeful initiative to help instructors make the rapid transition to remote teaching necessitated by the 2020 pandemic.

As we structured the practicum, we strove to be transparent, both in terms of how we communicated with our participants as learners, as well as in what we modelled about transparency to our participants, with the intention that they would adapt transparent design principles to their own teaching. As such, the practicum was deliberately built around principles of inclusion, accessibility and equity, drawing on the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework and inclusive teaching frameworks, and encouraging participants to reflect critically and deeply on their own teaching as they redesigned courses for

an online environment.

Creating the Practicum

The Practicum on the Foundations of Teaching Online, a three-week intensive program designed to enhance learning and teaching in remote contexts, was offered at our university for the first time in 2020, occasioned by the move to online instruction brought by the coronavirus pandemic. Northwestern University is a medium-sized research-intensive university serving 21,000 students, with main campuses in Evanston and Chicago, Illinois, and a third campus in Doha, Qatar. Most of our instructors lacked familiarity with online teaching, having little to no experience with either the technological or pedagogical skills associated with the medium. Additionally, many of our instructors were openly reluctant and even distrustful of remote teaching, since most teaching occurred on-ground (pre-Covid), although most recognized the pressing nature of acquiring necessary skills in this area during the pandemic. Our five units initially responded to the crisis individually, by offering multiple one-off sessions, with little coordination among us and much repetition of effort. Within a few weeks, we decided that we needed to create a more deliberate, structured, and coordinated initiative for our instructors, with the practicum as the result. At an institution with little general knowledge or experience with online teaching and learning, the practicum filled a yawning gap. We ran the practicum 7 times, over a seven-month span, engaging almost 500 instructors as participants and about 60 staff members from across the university.

In designing the curriculum, as senior leaders in our respective units, we decided at the outset that we wanted to present a unified approach, rather than show divisions among the various units coming together to offer it. We decided to interweave pedagogy and technology, recognizing that especially in the online environment, the two are inextricably bound up with each other. We adopted the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which offers a means to “improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn” (<https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>). With its emphasis on accessibility, the UDL framework ensured that accessibility and flexibility were funda-

mental rather than only included as an afterthought as participants designed their online courses. We also decided to integrate UDL into the structure of the practicum, and so we adopted and reflected the best practices and research regarding online teaching and learning.

Participants were offered large group, small group, and individual experiences; the opportunity to connect with other participants; and flexibility and choice so that they could carve their own paths through the material. By bringing together units from across the university, we were able to offer multiple consultations with a learning designer to each practicum participant. In the one-on-one consultations, learning designers answered questions, explained tools, approaches and strategies, and offered tailored recommendations and suggestions. Finally, we continuously reviewed and improved the practicum based on feedback from participants.

Practicum Curriculum and Structure

The practicum included three key components offering different levels of support: core and optional sessions, cohorts, and consultations. As we describe more fully in the evaluation, each of these components was critical in Foundations’ success. The curriculum mixed instruction in technology and in pedagogy with sessions on leading active learning activities in Zoom breakout rooms or facilitating group work at a distance. Participants were expected to take part in three core synchronous sessions, three cohort-based meetings, and individual consultations with learning designers; the rest of the material was available online for asynchronous engagement. See Table 1 for a sample schedule.

Cohort Group Meetings

To ensure more personalized support, participants were divided into cohorts of about 10 people in broad disciplinary groupings, guided by a facilitator. In addition to discipline-based cohorts, which grouped participants in humanities, sciences, social sciences, etc., cohorts also consisted of specialty groupings, such as languages or first-year classes. The cohort moved through the practicum together, meeting regularly to discuss questions and topics that arose from core and optional sessions. Research in the learning sciences emphasizes the importance of maximizing interaction and collaboration as a

Table 1. Sample Practicum Schedule

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Week 1	Cohort Group Kickoff: Overview of the Practicum, Canvas site, and resources		Core Session 1: Universal Design for Learning		Learning Design Consultation 1: Course mapping and discussing goals and concerns
	Opt Session 1: Grading & Assignments in Canvas	Opt Session 2: OER and low cost course materials	Opt Session 3: Facilitating discussion	Opt Session 4: Building online community	Opt Session 5: Providing accommodations online
Week 2	Core Session 2: Engaging Students through Active Learning	Learning Design Consultation 2*	Learning Design Consultation 2*	Core Session 3: Assessing Quality	Learning Design Consultation 2*
	Opt Session 6: Group work online	Opt Session 7: Panopto	Opt Session 8: Creating inclusive learning environment	Opt Session 9: Motivating students in online setting	Opt Session 10: Zoom practice session
Week 3	Cohort Group Feedback: Peer Evaluation	Learning Design Consultation 3*	Learning Design Consultation 3*	Learning Design Consultation 3*	Cohort Group Final: Recap and Comments
	Opt Session 1: Grading & Assignments in Canvas	Opt Session 2: OER and low cost course material	Opt Session 3: Facilitating discussion	Opt Session 4: Building online community	Opt Session 5: Providing accommodations online

* Learning Design Consultations were scheduled individually between participants and learning designers at a time that worked well for them.

key to learning (Eyler, 2018). The facilitator of each cohort acted as a central conduit for communication and facilitated peer feedback and brainstorming. Librarians served as the majority of the cohort facilitators, but a few staff from other units fulfilled this role as well. In addition, each cohort had two learning design consultants. The cohorts served to provide a built-in support network around shared experiences both during and after the practicum.

Core Sessions

Participants were required to take part in three core (90 minute) sessions: (1) Universal Design for Learning, (2) Engaging Students, and (3) Assuring Quality and Gaining Feedback. Each session was offered at various times for maximum flexibility. The synchronous and asynchronous material in the curriculum included resource lists referring participants to research in technology and pedagogy, exposing them to evidence-based practices.

Core Session One

We introduced the core principles of UDL (<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>) asking participants to identify potential barriers posed by online learning for various types of students and explored how to offer multiple means of representation of material, action and expression of ideas, and engagement in learning to alleviate those barriers. Participants also experienced the UDL principles, using both synchronous and asynchronous components (multiple means of representation), offering resources in

multiple formats (multiple means of representation), incorporating small and large group activities (multiple means of engagement), and utilizing various aspects of available technology for sharing thoughts (multiple means of expression).

Core Session Two

Participants reflected critically on engaging students in synchronous and asynchronous activities; explored the principles of active learning and what this meant for their teaching context; and made decisions about which technologies would best enhance and support student engagement. Throughout the session, participants considered how to make their activities active (Khan et al., 2017), inclusive, and equitable (Johnson, 2019).

Core Session Three

Participants explored standards for online course design and received a framework used to evaluate their course and identify areas of improvement. The framework was used in the cohort peer review session and used for continuous improvement of their course.

Optional Sessions

The practicum included ten different optional sessions, allowing participants to delve into certain topics more thoroughly, and to identify the supplementary material most relevant to their needs. These sessions were offered at multiple times to provide maximum flexibility for participants. The sessions

focused on university-supported tools (e.g. Canvas, Zoom, and Panopto), pedagogical and instructional strategies (e.g. creating an inclusive learning environment, building community online, assessing learning, fostering engaging discussions), and other related topics (e.g. open educational resources). See Table 1.

Consultations

The practicum also offered individualized support through consultations with a learning designer, who helped them adapt their courses for online

teaching, provided guidance and recommendations, and offered an expert opinion on how to accomplish their learning objectives with the online format in mind. Learning designers met individually with each participant three times (once per week) to assist them incorporate concepts discussed in the practicum to their own course maps (discussed below). Research has shown that such consultations are most constructive when the relationships are built on empathy, mutual respect, understanding, and a willingness to be flexible about different approaches

Table 2. Partial Course Map Example for Marketing and Communications 360, an upper-level course on innovation*

<p>Key course topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to define innovation • Theory of disruptive innovation • How to characterize and categorize different types of innovation • Innovation technologies and platforms • Innovation adoption • Customer buying behavior / internal and external barriers to adoption • Analyzing and critiquing real-world examples of marketing innovative solutions 				
<p>Course level learning objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe and classify the different ways that organizations innovate products and services and create value for customers through innovation. • Explain the processes by which customers adopt and engage with innovative solutions, including potential obstacles to adoption. • Learn how organizations can use integrated marketing communications to influence customer adoption, overcome obstacles, and sustain customer engagement. • Create a compendium of best practices and guidelines for marketing innovative products and services. • Evaluate the effectiveness of marketing programs launched in conjunction with specific innovative products and services. 				
Week	Topics covered	Specific learning objectives	Learning materials and activities (readings, lectures, supplemental resources)	Assessments / Deliverables (assignments, exams)
1	How to define innovation Theory of disruptive innovation	Provide a good working definition of innovation Distinguish between sustaining and disruptive innovation, providing examples of each	<p><i>Readings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keely, chapter 1 • Christensen (2015) • Simester (2016) <p><i>Lectures (recorded):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to define innovation • Introduction to the theory of disruptive innovation <p><i>Zoom session:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductions and questions <p><i>Active learning:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of innovation in-class (ungraded) quiz & discussion • Pringles exercise (asynchronous group activity) 	<p>Welcome survey</p> <p>Ungraded critical reflection ("What is innovation?")</p>
2	How to characterize and categorize different types of innovation	Generate 10 different types of innovation and provide examples of each	<p><i>Readings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keely, chapters 2–12 <p><i>Lectures:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ten types of innovation <p><i>Zoom session:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing your first case discussion 	Case preparation and write up on Google Glass

*Course map example courtesy of Reginald C. Jackson

(Richardson et al., 2019), which were all attributes that our learning designers sought to foster during their sessions. In a period of increased social isolation, learning designers sought to connect to the participants and emphasize our investment in their success, another key to successful learning (Eyler, 2018).

Course map

Instructors were each expected to create a simple “course map,” which served as a blueprint of sorts to help them align their course goals, learning objectives, activities and assignments and assessments. The course map became a framework to guide the instructors as they modified their courses to the new modality of online teaching. Complementing the UDL framework and principles of backwards design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), course mapping serves to make course activities and expectations for learning transparent, while recognizing the collaborative relationship between the instructor and the course designer. When creating a course map, participants identified learning objectives, determined assessment strategies, and selected the appropriate learning activities and materials to support these outcomes. See Table 2 for a sample course map.

Participants

Across seven separate iterations, 482 instructors participated in the practicum, representing fields of study from across all 12 of our university’s schools and colleges, with 37% tenure-line; 21% teaching-line; 14% graduate students; 10% adjunct; 8% staff; 4% visiting or research faculty, and 6% other. We noted that 91% of the registrants had not taught an online class prior to enrolling in the practicum, although many had been teaching when the pandemic forced an abrupt pivot to remote teaching.

Evaluation

Participants were all surveyed before and after the practicum. The pre-program survey was designed to capture participants’ experience and comfort with remote teaching, and to gauge what

they hoped to learn from participating in the practicum. The post-program survey was designed to capture how helpful different aspects of the practicum were for participants in thinking through their pedagogical and instructional choices. More than four-fifths of the 410 participants (85%) completed the pre-program survey and 191 (40%) participants completed the post-program survey.

Findings

Comfort

In the pre- and post-surveys, participants were asked to rate their sense of comfort around a number of key dimensions. As Table 3 indicates, participants had varying levels of discomfort with these dimensions prior to the practicum, especially in balancing synchronous and asynchronous content in their online courses and in applying the principles of UDL. The post survey showed an overall gain in confidence in all the dimensions of online teaching. Additionally, there were notable gains between how participants rated their sense of comfort before and after the practicum in all domains. In most areas, the percent of participants reporting that they felt comfortable or very comfortable with the core learning objectives increased substantially (averaging more than 40 percentage points). Just as importantly, their discomfort decreased by an average of 27 percentage points. Not surprisingly, participants were fairly confident in their abilities to design and lead meaningful synchronous class activities, as these were skills honed in face-to-face classrooms. Their confidence in doing so online increased the least of all the measures. When it came to applying the principles of UDL, engaging students in an online environment, or selecting relevant tools and strategies for online teaching, however, participants were much less confident prior to the practicum. By the end of the practicum, their comfort levels had doubled in each of these core competencies.

Table 3. Pre-Post Survey Comparison

Item	Pre-practicum survey (n=410)				Post-practicum survey (N=191)			
	N	Extremely uncomfortable or uncomfortable	Neutral	Extremely comfortable or comfortable	N	Extremely uncomfortable or comfortable	Neutral	Extremely comfortable or comfortable
Balancing Synchronous and Asynchronous content	321 (78.3%)	120 (37%)	128 (40%)	73 (23%)	188 (98.4%)	4 (2%)	49 (26%)	135 (72%)
Centering equity and inclusion in a remote setting	321 (78.3%)	77 (24%)	140 (44%)	104 (32%)	187 (97.9%)	9 (5%)	44 (24%)	134 (72%)
Creating meaningful asynchronous course activities	320 (78%)	106 (33%)	108 (34%)	106 (33%)	188 (98.4%)	8 (4%)	33 (18%)	147 (78%)
Implementing accommodations in a remote setting	322 (78.5%)	116 (36%)	124 (38%)	82 (26%)	186 (97.4%)	9 (5%)	47 (25%)	130 (70%)
Implementing universal design for learning elements	322 (78.5%)	121 (38%)	150 (47%)	51 (16%)	189 (99%)	7 (4%)	37 (20%)	145 (77%)
Leading or enabling meaningful synchronous class interactions	323 (78.8)	71 (22%)	92 (28%)	160 (50%)	189 (99%)	4 (2%)	28 (15%)	157 (83%)
Promoting student engagement in an online environment	321 (78.3%)	112 (35%)	112 (35%)	97 (30%)	186 (97.4%)	4 (2%)	32 (17%)	150 (81%)
Selecting relevant strategies, tools and methods	320 (78%)	69 (22%)	142 (44%)	109 (34%)	187 (97.9%)	4 (2%)	25 (13%)	158 (85%)

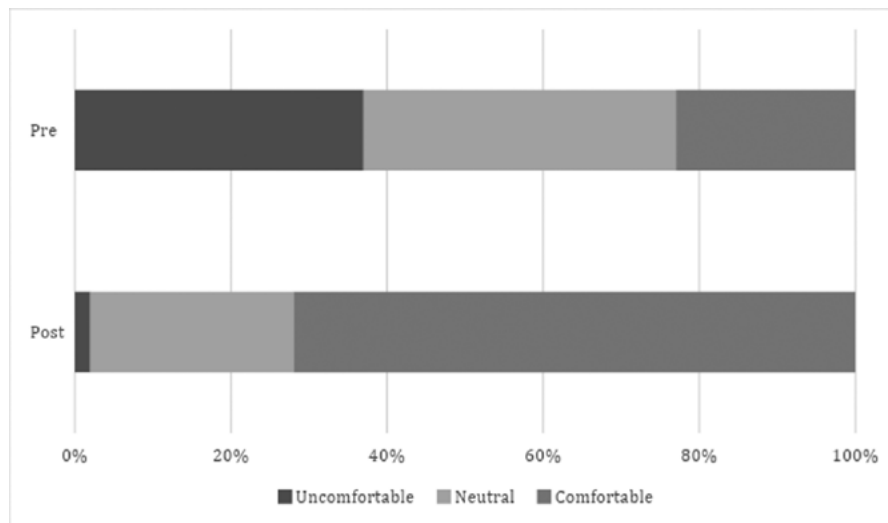


Figure 1. Pre-Post Comparison: comfort with balancing synchronous and asynchronous content

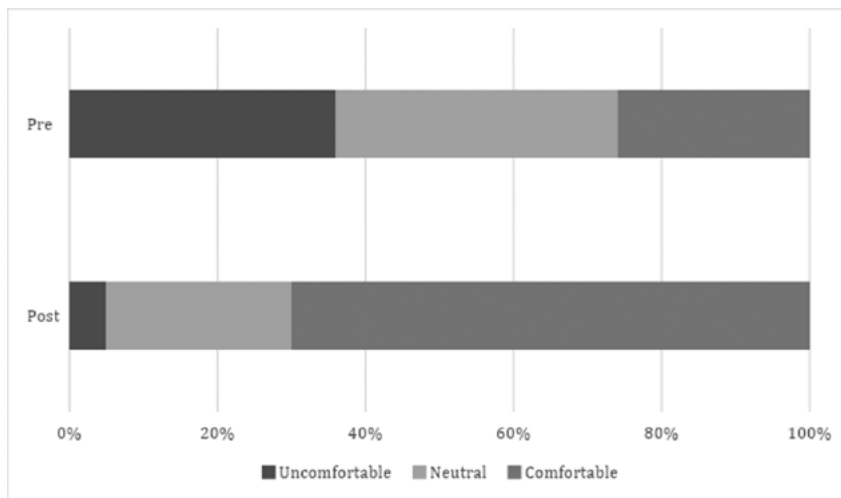


Figure 2. Pre-Post Comparison of Comfort implementing accommodations in a remote setting

Usefulness

When asked about what aspects of the program participants found most helpful or useful, the opportunity to interact with peers, particularly in cohorts, was most often mentioned. For example, this participant noted:

“Being in a learning experience with other faculty members from across the university was a welcome benefit—to hear best practices and key challenges from other departments and schools was added value to the practicum material.”

Many commented on the value of one-on-one or small group consultations with the learning designers, commenting on them being “informative,” “experienced,” and easy to work with (“She...took me through the steps easily.”). Others noted the course materials and resources, specific pedagogical and technological tools, and course mapping. While many participants highlighted the value from specific core or optional sessions, none stood out among all the sessions, suggesting that different sessions resonated with some participants more than others.

Areas to Improve

Participants also offered suggestions on how to improve the practicum as well. Such suggestions included having more technology-based sessions; grouping cohorts by discipline or experience level, shortening the length of sessions, and offering more individual consultations. A handful of participants suggested that we offer fewer sessions overall (citing being “overwhelmed” or “lacking time”), while a few recommended that we decrease the focus on pedagogy and course mapping.

Advice

Participants were asked what advice they would share about the practicum for future colleagues. Many recommended that participants identify their own goals, pace themselves, not try to attend all sessions, actively bring questions to sessions and meetings; make good use of their time with their consultants, and engage in the asynchronous pre-session work.

Time Commitment

Participants were asked to compare the expected time commitment for the practicum (4–5 hrs/week, including sessions, consultations and individual work), with their actual time spent. Of the 122 participants who answered this item, 74 participants (61%) indicated that they had spent the anticipated time, with 25 (20%) noting they had spent less than 4 hours, 20 (16%) spending 6–10 hours, and 3 indicating that they had spent more than 10 hours a week.

Final Reflections

Did the practicum make a difference? All indicators are yes. Participants acquired the skills they needed to teach online, receiving a great deal of support from the practicum staff as well as their peers. The courses taught in summer and fall were far more thoughtfully and transparently designed for online delivery than what those offered in the spring quarter. Moreover, the courses were designed with flexibility, equity and access in mind, and instructors were able to apply what they learned to new contexts. We also learned several important things from

the process itself, which we hope to incorporate in future iterations of the practicum.

Build on Our Strengths

We entered the collaboration without fully knowing the strengths the other units offered. Through conversations we began to recognize and value the different lenses and frameworks we brought to key topics. We deliberately partnered across units in developing sessions and resources, reinforcing one another's skills, knowledge and expertise, which was far more fruitful than our original individual ad hoc approaches. Sometimes our expertise was leveraged in unexpected ways. Our librarians, for example, who served as cohort leads entered the practicum with prior experience interacting with instructors from different fields and, as such, were invaluable in meeting diverse disciplinary needs.

Focus the Content

From the beginning, we had to curate the content we could offer. Each of our five units brought a wealth of expertise, knowledge and content, but we knew we could not overwhelm our participants with too much content or too many sessions. We had to think carefully about what constituted a relevant foundation for online teaching that would focus our participants and provide insight into key instructional, pedagogical and technological choices.

Create a Cohort Model

The cohort model provided small group support and a sense of much-needed community for participants, allowing them to bounce ideas off one another, share practices and strategies, and communicate their worries, hopes and concerns. Being in a cohort also helped participants stay motivated, and made the practicum more enjoyable overall.

Develop a Clear Communication Strategy

The practicum had many moving parts, requiring a great deal of coordination of the 40 staff involved with recruitment, registration, scheduling, implementation, coordination and evaluation, as well as communicating with almost 500 instructors at different stages. We developed email templates and a communication lead so that participants and staff members would not be confused. Even so, some participants found the communications confusing. We'll centralize communications even more

as we move forward.

Provide Individual Consultations

Early on, we knew that individual consultations had to be built into the practicum, to complement and reinforce all aspects of the practicum. Participants were able to think through and apply what they learned in authentic and practical ways tailored to their individual courses (especially with the course map).

Manage Our Own Expectations

We also had to remind ourselves that we all had other regular job duties to perform, many of which reached high levels of intensity as we coped with the pandemic. We learned how to get the practicum running while being transparent about our own responsibilities and needs, including the space to breathe and step away from time to time.

Overall, the practicum was a successful collaboration among five campus units that had never before partnered. Our senior administration expressed appreciation, not only for the practicum itself in helping hundreds of instructors prepare for and be comfortable with online teaching, but also for the model itself. We have already offered new "advanced" versions of the practicum, that offer more complex pedagogical and technological offerings. The practicum model may also be used to focus on other topics (e.g. inclusive teaching) in future iterations. Taking a transparent approach to what we were offering and why, and helping our participants think about transparency for their own students, helped elicit a transformation in online learning at our university.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Gina Peterson for helping collect and analyze the practicum data. We would also like to thank all of the learning consultants, librarians, and other staff from our units for supporting this endeavor.

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- Susanna Calkins**, Ph.D., is the Interim Center Director and Director of Faculty Initiatives at the Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching at Northwestern University.
- Jonathan Diehl**, M.S., is a Senior Blended Learning Specialist with Teaching and Learning Technologies, Northwestern University Information Technology.
- Victoria Getis**, Ph.D., is the Director of Teaching and Learning Technologies for Northwestern University Information Technology.
- Michelle Guittar**, M.S., is the Head for Instruction and Curriculum Support and the Librarian for Latin American Studies at Northwestern University Libraries.
- Reba-Anna Lee**, Ed.D., is Assistant Dean of Distance Learning at the School of Professional Studies at Northwestern University.
- James Stachowiak**, M.S.E., is the Director of Assistive Technology and Assistant Director of AccessibleNU at Northwestern University.

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Published by: Magna Publications, 2020
ISBN: 978-0-912150-76-5
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