

ASC ODE Instructor Spotlight: Dr. Zeynep Benderlioglu (Department of Evolution, Ecology and Organismal Biology) Transcript

[Sarah Dove] Welcome to this latest installment of the Office of Distance Education's Instructor Spotlight, a multimedia approach to highlighting instructors actively invested in cutting-edge online learning development and delivery from around the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. As a part of ODE's mission to support dynamic, research-driven and forward-thinking solutions proven to ensure understanding, engagement, access, and equity in online learning communities, we know that some of the most important work being done toward this purpose is happening in real-time, in the classroom.

My name is Sarah Dove and I'm an Instructional Designer for ASC ODE. Joining us for a conversation today is Dr. Zeynep Benderlioglu from the Department of Evolution, Ecology and Organismal Biology.

Dr. Benderlioglu is the founder and director of the Undergraduate Research Lab, an undergraduate research program in the Department of Evolution, Ecology, and Organismal Biology at Ohio State. Her lab offers formal in-person and online courses in principles of research design, data analysis, presentation, and scientific writing in a variety of topics. Since its inception in 2012, Zeynep has trained 366 undergraduate students from

various majors in research. Seventy-seven of these students went on to develop individual projects resulting in a total of \$58,428 fellowship and grant awards. A further 37 students then presented their studies in various local and national forums.

Zeynep's studies have focused on developmental stress, maternal behavior, aggression, dominance, and predator-prey relationships. Her research has been funded by numerous fellowships and grants that culminated in a widespread coverage in local, national, and international news outlets and magazines, including CNN, Reuters, BBC, Wall Street Journal, Forbes Magazine, Discovery Channel, Columbus Dispatch, and Lantern. In addition, she regularly engages in public outreach that focuses on scientific literacy, biodiversity, and ingroup-outgroup behavior in humans and nonhuman animals. Zeynep has received her PhD degree and postdoctoral training at Ohio State.

Our first question for Dr. Benderlioglu was, "What role does distance education play in the landscape of learning, particularly for higher education?"

[Dr. Zeynep Benderlioglu] Distance education has a lot of potential. First of all, it is widening access to knowledge in any field. I believe distance education is a great complement to the traditional types of education. In addition to that, I also believe that the more distance education opportunities you have. In higher education, the more people that will be educated, by definition, the more investment opportunities will arise. Those investments will then translate in higher education, it can lead to technological innovation, so on and so forth.

[Sarah] Then next question we asked Dr. Benderlioglu was, “What were your first impressions with distance education and how do you consider it’s potential?”

[Dr. Benderlioglu] My first impressions with since education came very unnaturally with the pandemic. That was the biggest shock for me. It was very, very difficult. I had an attitude towards it. I hated it. I struggled a lot and I've worked a lot. These are very, very hard decisions on the part of the instructor as a human being... navigating... These are very, very stressful circumstances and all of us have been learning how to proceed. But in the end I have seen the potential, how much it reached to a much wider audience, not just particularly undergraduate students, to all kinds of ages, from all walks of life.

[Sarah] Next, we asked, “What advice would you give to someone newly embarking on their journey into planning and designing for distance education?”

[Dr. Benderlioglu] First of all, you have to be very, very patient and you have to prepare yourself that you will be working really, really hard. Things will take much longer than you presume. Things will go wrong. You have to be completely patient with yourself, with your students, and you will also be prepared to change content. I was also given advice in the beginning when I started designing online courses. Oh, once you create a content, it's really, really hard. Online content creation is a hard work. Everybody who does it, has done it will agree to that. It's much harder. You have to be very, very focused when, especially if you're delivering through a video, lecture, etc. It takes an enormous amount of time to create the content. However, once you create the content, everything will be peachy and then you will

keep repeating it because you've already done it. It's all recorded. You don't need to do anything else. That's a myth. It's a huge myth. Another example will be the content of my infectious diseases course. Transmission, Evolution, Ecology of Infectious Diseases. Well, how could I simply create content on infectious diseases and then not change it on a yearly basis? There's so many developments, how can I deny that from my students, right? I have to constantly look at the updates, I have to look for those type of opportunities, otherwise I'm not doing a job, good job as an instructor.

[Sarah] We then asked Dr. Benderlioglu, "Can you talk about the importance of incorporating themes of global, national, and personal interest in your course design?"

[Dr. Benderlioglu] So I have created content very relevant to students themselves that are of individual global cultural nature. The reason why I thought first of all, I have to generate interest. I'm teaching research, I'm a scientist. I am really excited about what I study. I want to instigate some sort of excitement, motivation in students. First of all science starts with fascination and wonder, so how could I convey this? Sometimes things are very serious, like COVID-19 or protest, social unrest. How do I create a certain environment for students where they can really read very interesting materials relevant to their individual experiences or what's going on globally around them? And at the same time, I teach the science or research process. Because research process is general, is general. You could be coming from a physics department, you could be a neuroscientist, you could be a sociologist, psychologist, biologist. The process is about organization of knowledge and asking an intelligent question hopefully and then looking at how, at ways in which you can answer that question

through testing and collecting data and so on and so forth. Creating those particular content is generating a lot of interest and motivation in figuring out, figuring things out, and that's very, very... one thing Feynman said, the Famous physicist, "it is really pleasurable to figure things out." So that was one motivation for me so that I could engage it. And it worked quite well. By simply creating safe spaces, interesting topics, students were far more engaged. The feedback was very, very positive and then they were fascinated because the topics are fascinating. The topics are really creating deep thoughts and some challenges for students. Therefore, the assignments are also, you know, like more engaged. Another advice I will give is to check with your students how they're doing and how we're doing. While you will say that assessment is a kind of checking, evaluation how they're doing, right, I'm not talking about that. I'm asking directly. So I create a space, for example a discussion forum, which I had done a lot. And an opportunity where you can ask directly, well what part of this particular, say, analysis you have had struggle with. Tell me what you're struggling with. Tell me what I need to review for you. I keep asking this in terms of... and this is very, very different from standard evaluations at the end. It is during the course. This requires quite a you know, a large amount of investment on my part because I didn't get my message across in terms of this content. So this work really, really well. You will think that people will not be our students, will not be so willing to look a little bit more vulnerable in terms of their understanding and not be honest because that might, you know, create some prejudice against them because they're not understanding what. That did not happen at all because it was an open forum. And then they would agree with the students. They really, really

appreciate it because I created recorded lectures based on every single question. If there were like 20 questions, I've answered all of them. There was one question along with those lines. Here is the answer. This is how you do it then I recorded myself doing it. So I think that will be really important to check back with your students.

[Sarah] The next question we asked was, "What pedagogical strategies have worked well for a distance education environment? And, have you found any that presented trouble?"

[Dr. Benderlioglu] So the best aspect of the online education and the approach I found working for students was the discussions question forums so that they could be engaged more often with the content I created. It was very, very important. And the more I pose discussion question forum based on interesting readings, the more engaged they were. Also, the discussion question forums served as content created for myself. It led the students towards a certain topic. So I could simply move along like a wave with what they have written and I will post something based on what they have written, what they have been engaged. Then it created more and more engagement. It was very very interesting for them. So it worked best and that way I also could ensure that they were not checked out from the class. Another point that worked very well is decreasing the amount of readings, the amount of information in one setting, into smaller chunks. Low stake assignments that work best for me pedagogically. So I chunk. I put everything into smaller chunks. I gave more engagement so that they could log in more often so they would not have a very long time in between two assignments. So, so that they could just move in a very good pace, keeping engaged with the course content. So

that worked very, very well. And what didn't work is in-class exams, which is a no brainer. Anybody should have known it. But I have committed that mistake myself. So many things can go wrong. Suddenly, for example, the software I'm using in exams, they go into some sort of maintenance mode and students cannot access that. Somebody has this wireless problems that have been, you know, occurring on and off. I have network problems in my own house. Anything that could go wrong will go wrong. Therefore, in class exams that we have been used to and it's important that students do absorb material and it's important evaluation tool. I believe they're not suitable for online classes.

[Sarah] Our final question was, "In your opinion, where should we go with distance education from here?"

I believe we have to really think hard especially with online education with the tools and the challenges we have gotten how we teach our traditional classes. It's very, very important and there is no way I will ever give up my in person classes. I really enjoy teaching, interacting with students. But we have to understand online education is not the answer to so many things. It is very important to have the balance, what fits in what circumstance and not only the person who is teaching and or the institution where this education is taking place. We have to be very, very careful in transforming and translating one practice into the other. I think everything should be complementary to each other. That's what I would say.

[Sarah] We want to express our gratitude to Dr. Benderlioglu for participating in our Instructor Spotlight series. Thank you, as well to all those listening.