Instructor Spotlight_Kevin Richards

Dr. Kevin Richards:
The trajectory I see is sort of distance learning relies upon infrastructure for what it can do. And so thinking ahead, I'm thinking, you know, what is projected to kind of converge are these different types of technologies like more broadband, better Wi-Fi, virtual reality, AI kind of coming together to create sort of devices that are much more innocuous, wearable can make you feel like you are present in places that you're not. So you could connect from anywhere and feel like you are sharing a virtual space with someone. I think if we like really look, you know, 10 years, maybe 20 years, maybe 15 down the road, then we're looking at, you know, people could attend a seminar, a lab, anything like that and work with virtual objects and avatars that represent other people that look like other people and really feel like they are embodied in that space. And so I think that's like really like far down the road what distance learning could look like. But if you look backwards and think about like correspondence courses and how those began in like the 18th century and how just being able to exchange information in a way that you can reflect and grow from it. I think that's always been there with distance learning. It's just we have much more sort of infrastructure to expand how much contact we have with each other and how quickly we have that contact. I've been teaching for about probably the last five years. Definitely. I was already like looking at ways to engage large classes students in large classrooms when they were in person and started looking at what techniques were being used for online courses to get people to talk to each other, to discuss things. Because in the long, in the large lecture courses it felt like there was still, you know, there's distance between students, they weren't getting to know each other that that well. So how do you create sort of the sense of a smaller classroom in the large classroom and online techniques started to work. And so I started to develop all of my large lecture courses in that vein. So where they would be working with each other sort of weekly through other means that were online. And so that was right before the pandemic. So I had, when I was teaching, teaching the courses, I had designed them, developed them so that were they were more like ready to be online. And so when the pandemic hit right in the middle, it was just a very easy transition for those courses for me. I want to have always like really polished, very, you know, concise, good lecture material that doesn't waste their time, that doesn't like, you know, look unprofessional. And so I've spent a lot of time writing those, scripting those and then editing those and putting them together and then breaking them up so that there's, you know, for each lecture, they're going to be broken up into like sort of subsets. So I'd say like if you're doing it like I would do it, it's going to be a lot of startup investment in the materials and then you can breathe a little bit and then you can start focus on, well, I want to change that. I want to add this, I want to do this sort of experiment with this assignment now, see how that works and then improve it. And everything is like continually sort of being improved. That's what makes it fresh and what makes it kind of exciting to teach the same courses. You can be like, you know, ah, I could add this, I just read this book and I really think that this is a really interesting angle. Let me see if I can apply it to this assignment or add this to this lecture so that makes it kind of new from this side. I typically will break a a course down that's 15 weeks into smaller sections. So like 5 week sections where you end up trying to scaffold the assignments so that in the 5th week it can culminate in something larger like they're maybe like working on like ideas in one week they're starting to do prewriting or something like that. They're drafting or something like that. So then fifth week you get a pretty good product. Then the second leg or segment builds off of that first, but then again starts to develop with those ideas that they've been working with into that second project. And then the third. And then each of those projects is also sort of like a different medium or a different aspect, a different format that they can work with. So they're expanding, they're not just like repeating what they're doing. I don't think like having the same format 15 weeks in a row doesn't. I don't think that works. And so every week there is a new assignment. It has a different format so that they're not doing the same thing again and again because the repetition, even though

it can provide that ease into the assignment for them. Oftentimes it just becomes like the fluff because it's a task, but you give them something new. No, this week you're doing a video and you're doing a social identity wheel or you know, something that's bringing them in, in some way. So their perspective into then the focus, which is the material. So they have some stakes, they have some investment, they know about themselves enough, but then they're engaging with material in a way that they hopefully produce something new. So I try to offer as much flexibility as possible. So the courses can be completed asynchronously, but there's live sessions that are optional and those always go in in more depth. You get like sort of more information from those and they get a little bonus for attending those. Thankfully, I have good TAs that want to engage in sort of what we would call sort of like we're imitating sort of a podcast type of type of presentation where we're much more conversational, much more of a informal relax. It's not just one person speaking where you're just like kind of I'll be doing this while there's more emotion, there's more give and take, there's more like sort of presence in the moment when you're talking with someone else. So that's one thing I think that it's taken sort of from YouTube or other formats and started to implement this just this semester, and it's working really well for me. It doesn't feel like I'm talking to the void. The students, they get more different perspectives for more people, and you can see that they're engaging more, they're asking more questions, they're putting more things into the chat because it just invites that. The one thing that you're missing in larger classes or also online classes is having that sort of very quick feedback. And so AI can provide in a way that really quick feedback that supports and helps students develop their writing. Now as students are probably thinking of AI as like, you know, write my paper with this prompt, you know, and then it's like it just does it and there's no thought involved in it.

And that's dangerous. And it's also like not wanted because they're not, there's nothing transformative about that. It's very empty. And so the getting away from like the empty type of AI which takes over things and doesn't allow us to think so much to the AI that's adapted and applied to actually like try to encourage that. I think that's like the key difference where I would be like oh, AI is working well here, let's integrate it here and keep that other stuff out and figure out ways and techniques to discourage that use in that way, that empty use. But that's not the only emerging technology I look at or that we get hands on. I think, you know, for me, I started more with like virtual reality and I'm not giving up on that even though it is kind of like, you know, it's in the background now, but AI and virtual reality and also you know, micromanization of technology and also just like the better and better sort of Wi-Fi that we're going to get makes it very possible that we're going to be wearing sort of like our computers or our smartphones at some point and be able to do things that we couldn't do before. Where we feel very present in a space trying to convey to a student who's never been in a headset exactly what it's like. They'll have no clue. You really do feel like you're somewhere else if you're just talking about it or reading about it or looking at a flat screen image of it. You don't get the sense of like really what it is. And so trying to have them experience it, have that part of the course where they're actually like trying these things out. And there's a lot of other tools that like, you know, like the using some of these mapping tools to try and tell stories. They're incredibly useful and they're really, they're adopted already outside in the professional world. So why not give students insight into those practice with those, you know, so that at least when people are mentioning them, they know what they're talking about. They're not kind of like trying to imagine things. And I think that's important because AI's not going to go away. Virtual reality is being integrated more and more in other places, and a lot of these other tools are being adopted or like, you know, other types of these are being adopted. So I think it's they need experience with it because they're going to be asked to do stuff with it. I've taught for a while a science fiction course. And in that course I really try to get students to learn how to speculate through examples and to speculate about the social impact of technologies. And a lot of times also the technologies shape how people think like the concepts that they're using, so like on a broader scale. And then the focus for the students is to then apply that to their field of interest, right? And so to kind of look at what is the cutting edge technology in their field of interest and then to start to

write and speculate where it's going. So when they go out on the market or they just want to engage in conversation with other people in that profession, they know the cutting edge like they know where they have an idea of a vision of where everything is going. And so the same thing with this course, but it's much more focused on near future is because the emerging technologies that we have are rapidly changing sort of like the the ground rules for how we're interacting with each other and our institutions and the, you know, the way that our institutions can actually function. And so with this course it's looking at what are policy makers thinking about in Europe because it's, you know, I'm in the German department, it's the German course. So what are they thinking about in Europe? How does that differ from what we're thinking about the US and China? And so we have sort of some articles that really focus on policy and then there's readings that are science fiction based, which then takes those sort of that theme for that week and simulate it but simulate in large scale the near future, what are the impacts on everyday life, on social structures, on the institutions that we're going to be discussing. And then we go from sort of theme to theme and we focus sometimes on certain technologies and students get experience with that or get sort of insight into that and then that becomes like the discussion, the response discussion that we have weekly. So that's the basis for it. But I think it's very, very important because these are, this is the infrastructure that's going to be changing the way that we're doing things in the near future.