A Collection of Teaching Advice: Teaching through the Pandemic

Zooming to St. Louis: a virtual field trip

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This teaching brief describes a virtual field trip that was organized in collaboration with Iowa State alumni and other experts in the discipline in order to give students a valuable learning experience, despite being unable to physically visit the location.

Teaching and learning context

ARTID 569E Inclusive Environments is a senior/graduate level course in the Interior Design Program with an enrolment of 18 students. In Fall 2020, it was taught primarily face-to-face in a socially distanced classroom with scheduled online components. The course explores how multiple factors prevent people from accessing the environment, e.g., disability, age, gender, religion, poverty, and language, and how good design can help to address such inequalities.

Connection to course learning objectives

In keeping with the theme of the course, I aim to use the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a set of guidelines for optimizing learning for all, by introducing various teaching modalities to suit student learning preferences, e.g., lectures, guest lectures, readings, active learning exercises, group work, and site visits. A major component is a final project where students apply what has been learned in class to a service- learning project.

This year, the final project focused on the design of housing for individuals with HIV/AIDS in St. Louis, MO, in conjunction with a non-profit organization, Doorways. Under normal circumstances, a field trip would be essential to support the learning outcomes of the project. The challenge in Fall 2020 was in providing students with the experience of a field trip without being able to visit the location, without examining the site in context of the city, and without engaging with the non-profit "client" and other professionals concerning the project due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Applied teaching strategy: A virtual field trip

The solution was a virtual field trip. I enlisted the expertise of an ISU Alumnus from Community & Regional Planning (CRP), Brian Hurd, Rise Community Development, and, in classic "snowballing," he recruited another ISU CRP Alumnus, Cecelia Dvorak, City of St. Louis, together with other professionals involved in the project site. In addition, I approached a government sponsored HIV/AIDS education program and connected with two experts in HIV/AIDS based at the University of Minnesota and Minnesota State Government who agreed to participate.

With our alumni, we developed a schedule that included the following:

1. An introduction to the project assignment and some background about HIV/AIDS;
2. A session about the city of St. Louis and history of the area around the site, the CEO and President of Doorways, for whom the students would be designing housing, to explain the organization's set-up, philosophy, and requirements;
3. An overview of planning issues related to the site, including a drone overview of the site;
4. A presentation about the procurement and financing of the site;
5. A session from the architects describing their philosophy and design approach;
6. A Q&A session from experts in HIV/AIDS; and,
7. Lastly, a wrap-up session.

Before the field trip, students were provided with a reading list by the HIV/AIDS experts and had to post two questions to Canvas that I forwarded to the experts to be answered during the field trip (this avoided any reluctance by students to ask sensitive questions on the day). The virtual field trip ran from 8am to 1.30pm with several scheduled breaks to give students downtime and re-energize before returning to the virtual session. During the breaks, music was played by artists who had died from AIDS to provide context and avoid the awkward moments where people are joining virtual meetings and might not be feeling like starting a conversation. The virtual field trip was run on one continuous Zoom link that was hosted by our alumni and that guest presenters could join at their appropriate time. Our alumni had also collated individual presentations into one continuous PowerPoint presentation, including video links, to provide a seamless flow to the day. To engage students, our alumni launched low stakes online quizzes relevant to the subject. Presentations were timed for a maximum of 45 minutes each to avoid fatigue. On the day, students could also engage by asking questions via the 'chat' box or by unmuting.

Why this strategy worked

The benefit of virtual field trips is that they can be appropriate for face-to-face, hybrid, and online synchronous classes. They can be suitable for undergraduate and graduate level courses in any discipline. They could be particularly applicable for large-enrolment courses where physical travel is impractical. While they are a necessity now, they could be usefully employed even when travel resumes. Although virtual travel cannot replicate the actual travel experience, it has the advantage of nil cost to students, meaning financial hardship is no barrier to attendance. It is also less time-consuming, without the physical logistics of arranging travel and accommodation, and with the ability to bring a range of experts together who are not necessarily based in the same place.

Key takeaways

There is a saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." I would rephrase that to say, "It takes a collaboration to implement a virtual field trip." Virtual field trips can be as time-consuming to arrange as physical field trips, but the task was lightened for me because of our alumni who generously came forward to help to give "our Cyclones" a good day.

Faculty have access to alumni, advisory board members, and professionals in the field who are willing and able to give their expertise. Even during this pandemic, our collaborators gave their time and knowledge. The result was a rewarding and valuable experience for students.

The learning outcomes of the project, the students' research documents, conceptual designs, final plans, and renderings, demonstrated a thorough understanding about St. Louis and the site context, about the housing needs of individuals with HIV/AIDS, and about the condition of HIV/AIDS.

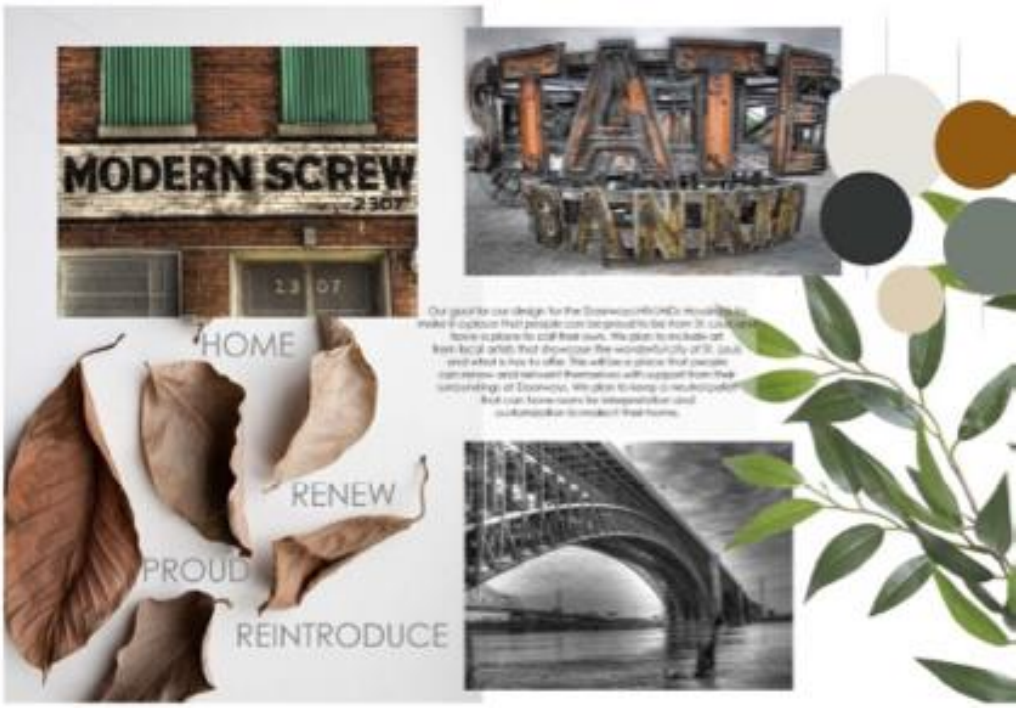

Figure 1: Conceptual Design. Project team: Meghan Hartman, Eliza Malloy, and Emilia Wheeler.

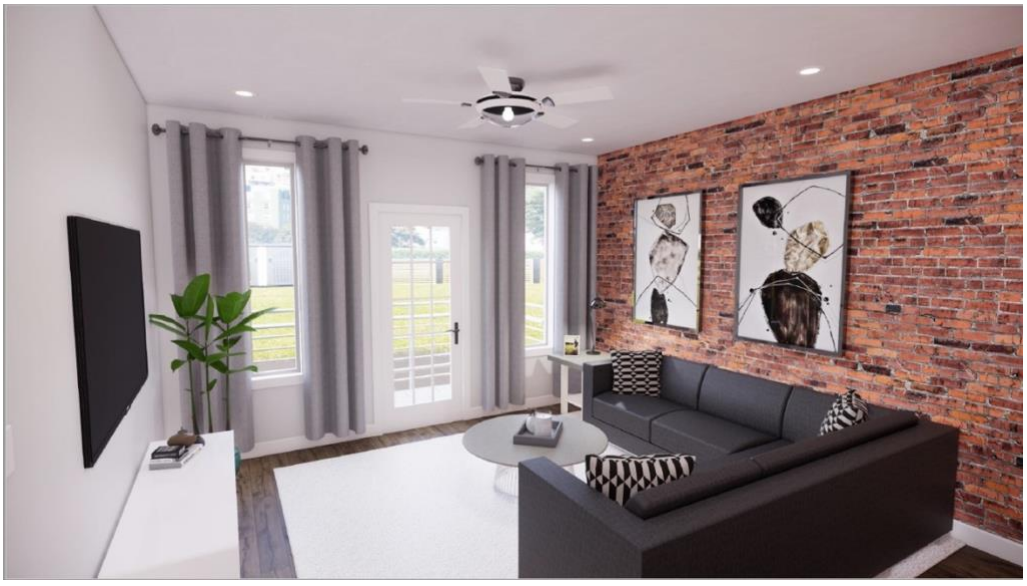

Figure 2: Apartment Living Room Design. Project team: Arianna Fore, Cambria Lang, and Noah Weber. Image: Noah Weber.

Figure 3: Community Center Café Design. Project team: William Noesen, Lexis Ruroden, and LeaValaitis. Image: William Noesen.

To complete our collaboration with everyone who participated in the virtual field trip, they were invited to the online final presentation, an opportunity for students to share their design outcomes and receive expert feedback. At the end of the semester, students submitted a reflection paper where they discussed their main takeaways from the class. Most students mentioned how much they had enjoyed and benefited from the virtual field trip.

Additional Resource: Suggested Virtual Field Trip Schedule

The below schedule is what we utilized for the virtual field trip. It could easily be modified to meet the needs of various circumstances, i.e., number of sessions, length of the desired field tip, and much more.

1. 8:00 a.m. – 8:30 a.m.: Introduction
2. 8:30 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.: Session 1
3. 9:00 a.m. – 9:45 a.m.: Session 2
4. 9:45 a.m. – 10:15 a.m.: Break
5. 10:15 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.: Session 3
6. 11:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.: Session 4
7. 11:30 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.: Session 5
8. 12:15 p.m. – 12:30 p.m.: Break
9. 12:30 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.: Session 6
10. 1:15 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.: Wrap-up