Introduction

I participated in the Course Design Academy with the intention of backward designing a course I will be teaching for the first time in Spring 2024, CRIM 125 Intro to Criminology and Justice Studies. Although I previously taught a similar course, Intro to Criminology, while a graduate student at the University of Notre Dame, that was in fact backward designed, I realized the need to significantly redesign the course for three reasons:

1) I need to tailor the course to the backgrounds and experiences of Cal Poly Humboldt students.
2) Although I taught the course at Notre Dame from a critical criminology perspective that fits with our CPH department's focus on critical criminology, a scant two weeks were dedicated to discussions of restorative justice and other topics relevant to the field of Justice Studies. I need to redesign the course to balance the amount of time and material dedicated to each field.
3) As I will be teaching the course in a synchronous online format, I need to design it in a way to maximize student engagement in that format, that may differ from activities previously used in-person.

Changes Made

For the purposes of backward design, I focused more on reasons 1 and 3 above (as 2 is content-related, driven by the purpose of this course in introducing students to our combined Criminology and Justice Studies program).

Although I am not currently teaching this course, during the Course Design Academy I conducted Mid-Semester Feedback in another course I am teaching. Although the feedback was conducted in a graduate seminar, the primary suggestion for improving the course was one that I have sensed is relevant to undergraduate courses as well: to reduce the amount of assigned reading.

Many Cal Poly Humboldt students in our program work full-time or close to full-time on top of going to school. Some also juggle caregiving responsibilities, sports, and other demands on their time. Many are struggling to make ends meet. I was faced with the dilemma: how do I backward design the course to meet the needs of these students?

In the past, I have done things like provide guiding questions with readings, provide resources on how to effectively skim and speedread, and so forth. However, given the feedback of my graduate students, who are truly engaged and interested in the material we are covering (not just trying to get out of reading), I decided to go through the rest of the course schedule and make one reading each week optional (roughly a 25% reduction in reading load). This will allow us to cover other readings in more depth while also helping them find work/school/life balance.

In backward designing my CRIM 125 course, I am asking myself the question: is this reading essential to student learning on this topic? I am also working to include alternative media like podcasts, videos, newsclips, and so forth as relevant.

In the material I covered on accessibility and communicating with students, it was recommended that assignment types be varied and that some assignments have multiple submission options. I already have varied assignment types worked into the course and plan to offer alternatives for the major course

project (e.g. instead of just requiring a essay, the option of an essay, presentation, podcast, visual display, website, etc.).

In line with backward design, course learning outcomes, and items 1 and 3 above, I am working to integrate more activities focused on application throughout the course.

Impacts on My Professional Development

While this was not my first introduction to backward design, it was a good reminder of principles that should guide my course preparation (something that requires planning and time investment). This academy challenged me to think more about how to backward design courses to meet the needs of Cal Poly Humboldt students, many of whom juggle multiple responsibilities beyond school. I will take this knowledge with me as I design (and redesign) courses in the future, beyond the CRIM 125 course I focused on during this academy.

I have also learned how to use some new tools on Canvas, namely the course design tools, which will help me to make Canvas more accessible and easier to navigate in future courses.