Carol Impara:

The whole concept of regular and effective contact is all about trying to foster a sense of community in your courses that may happen naturally in person, but in an online course, you have to consciously build it in.

Christina Barsi:

Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

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And I'm Sun Ezzell, and you're listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast.

Christina Barsi:

Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground so to speak, by bringing to you the activities and events you may not have time to attend. The resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

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Speaker 3:

And I know I'm going to achieve my goals, and I know people here are going to help me to do it.

Speaker 5:

She is a sociology major, and she is transferring to CalPoly Pomona. Psychology major, English major.

Sun Ezzell:

From transforming part-time into full time.

Speaker 6:

I really liked the time that you spent with Julie, about how to write a CV and a cover letter.

Christina Barsi:

Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

Speaker 7:

Think of the natural environment around us as a library.

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We want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mt. SAC. But most importantly, we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi, Mt. SAC alumni, and producer of this podcast.

Sun Ezzell:

And I'm Sun Ezzell, learning assistance faculty and professional learning academy coordinator.

Christina Barsi:

And this is the Magic Mountie Podcast.

Sun Ezzell:

Hi, this is Sun Ezzell. This week, I had the pleasure of talking with Carol Impara, Distance Learning Coordinator, and Catherine McKee, Assistant Distance Learning Coordinator. I wanted to get a perspective on what the transition to online teaching and learning has been like for them. They also share some details about SPOT training. We had a little technical difficulty in this one, you might hear some echo from time to time. Please bear with us as we stumble our way through learning how to record remotely. Let's get started.

Sun Ezzell:

Welcome back to the magic Mountie podcast. I'm here today with Carol Impara, Distance Learning Coordinator, and Catherine McKee, Assistant Distance Learning Coordinator. Thank you so much for all your hard work and helping us through this transition and for joining us today on the podcast.

Catherine McKee:

Happy to be here.

Carol Impara:

Yes. It's nice to talk to you Sun.

Sun Ezzell:

It's nice to hear your voices. I was wondering, could you just tell a little bit about your role on the distance learning committee?

Carol Impara:

This is Carol. As the Distance Learning Coordinator, I'm the co chair for the committee, so I set the agenda, and obviously I compile the minutes, write recommendations and draft resolutions that they're required. I'm also responsible for pre checking and ushering through the curriculum process, the distance learning amendment forms, which are required by the state to be filed before faculty can teach their courses online.

Catherine McKee:

My role on the distance learning committee is much more limited than Carol's, since most of my focus is on SPOT. I do go over the agenda and help go over the distance learning amendment forms, but Carol's role is much more important, bigger than mine is.

Carol Impara:

No. Well, Catherine's role, SPOT stands for skills and pedagogy for online teaching. And it's our training program that faculty must pass in order to be allowed to teach online at Mt. SAC. SPOT, I think, has been recognized. We've had a number of faculty who have told us this, that it's pretty thorough. And one of the strengths I think is that you have a reviewer, a very experienced reviewer like Catherine, who's looking over your online training and giving you individualized feedback. So SPOT is very much about learning and then showing that you can do it. And I think that that's a real strength of it. It's also very... It's time consuming to do.

Sun Ezzell:

I think we all have SPOT training on our to do list now, if we haven't been SPOT trained. Could you talk a little bit more about what's the SPOT training like, and what should I do to get myself ready to jump into that?

Catherine McKee:

Well, SPOT training assumes that you have some Canvas competency. So someone who wants to go through SPOT and get the certification so they can teach online at Mt. SAC, should first take some of the basic Canvas training classes offered through the FCLT. And we have some really good ones that are set up by Michelle Newhart, Hugo Aguilera and Eva Figueroa. And so take some of those maybe Canvas basics or the Canvas intensives right before the semester starts. Many of them are now currently offered online through POD. And then once you have some basic Canvas competency, you sign up for SPOT through POD Connect, and that's how you get started.

Catherine McKee:

It is a self paced distance learning course, which is really a no-no in the real distance learning world. We are not allowed to have self pays classes, at least for now, because that reeks of being a correspondence course, which we're not allowed to offer. But the SPOT course takes faculty members through the process of building their own SPOT course, which they will then submit for review. And so there are specific tasks in SPOT that the faculty members do in building their own SPOT courses, and once they're done with that, they upload a checklist, a rubric, into SPOT to let us know that their course is ready for review and we review it. And when I say we, I mean Mike Dowdle and Sandra Weatherilt and I, we were lucky to add the two of them just recently due to the Coronavirus pandemic to help out with the reviews, because so many faculty members are going through SPOT all of a sudden.

Carol Impara:

Right. I think one of the strengths of SPOT is that it is specific to Mt. SAC, and we also have used the CVC-OEI, which stands for the California Virtual Campus - Online Education Initiative, standards to inform what kind of tasks we're looking for and sort of what our standards are. So what we've tried to do is to norm it to a group that is responsible for ensuring best practices for online teaching throughout the state.

Catherine McKee:

Right. So these are not just weird Mt. SAC requirements. These are ones that would be recognized at a lot of colleges throughout the state. And in fact, we often have faculty members from other colleges who want to come through our SPOT course, which we don't allow. But because apparently it's gotten a good reputation at local colleges.

Sun Ezzell:

Wow. Congratulations. That's awesome to hear. How much of the numbers increased? How many people usually sign up for SPOT training in any given year and what is it right now?

Catherine McKee:

Oh, well, funny you should ask that, Sun, because I have recently run some numbers, sorry if you hear papers rustling. I think during the 18'-19' academic year, I think there were 139 faculty members total who signed up for SPOT. And then, from July 1st of 2019, until February 25th of this year, we had 59 faculty members sign up for SPOT. And since the 1st of March or so, we've had over 230 faculty members sign up for SPOT.

Sun Ezzell:

Wow. So we should be sending coffee and chocolate and you must be working around the clock right now.

Catherine McKee:

Pretty much. And I'm very lucky that the college has recognized that this is really what I call a tsunami of SPOT, and has recognized that we need help with SPOT. So, luckily they have, I don't know if the right word is appointed or designated Mike Dowdle and Sandra Weatherilt as two additional SPOT reviewers who got started last week. And so, they're helping go through the courses of faculty members who are still submitting courses, hoping to be certified for summer. And that is a very tight timeline. I hope we can get through those faculty members courses, but Sandra and Mike are helping do that. And they have a lot of great experience. They're both former distance learning coordinators here at Mt. SAC. They both have had the OEI peer online course reviewer training. Mike's course is even aligned with the OEI rubric. And so, I just feel very lucky that they have started helping out.

Carol Impara:

Yeah, both of them just can hit the ground running. They've both done it. And I think that, like we've mentioned, I think that this is a strength, but it means that it can't be assembly line. It means that you have somebody who has a lot of training and experience, who's looking at a faculty course and sort of able to... Has internalized the standards of best practices in online teaching. And therefore, can really help each faculty member kind of reach that standard in their own course. Because, we certainly honor the fact that a faculty member might want to do their course a little different way than we do it. It's not like there's one size fits all here. But it is something that, we try to be encouraging and we try to give it our full attention when we take a look at it.

Catherine McKee:

Yeah. Each review can take several hours and then you provide feedback and send it back to the faculty member for perhaps some more work or some changes to be made. And this back and forth can happen several times. Ideally it wouldn't, but there's a lot of communication between the reviewer and the faculty member with it all hoping to be positive, so that the course ends up so it is most effective for the students, but also ideally efficient for the faculty member.

Carol Impara:

And there's another part also that SPOT works to do, which is to make sure that our courses stay in compliance with title five and federal regulations. And if we're, when we have an ACC JC visit, that if they dip into our courses, that they see that we're doing what we need to do. So we're sort of trying to do two things, which is honor, or maybe more than two things, honor the faculty members creativity and competence, make sure that this course is set up in a way that the average student can navigate really well, but also make sure that we've sort of checked all the boxes for an ACC JC visit.

Sun Ezzell:

There are so many parts to the whole transition and so much work that goes into each of those parts. I was wondering, could you talk a little bit more about what faculty might try to keep at the heart of their teaching as they transition to online teaching?

Carol Impara:

I think that's a great question. I didn't really come to realize this until I sent my course through OEI alignment. And OEI alignment, I told you, that's the statewide kind of consortium that sets these best standards and practices. And they asked me to change my course a lot. And I was wondering, why is that? And then I realized that so much of the changes that they were asking me to do were things that helped humanize the course and helped make the course as much as possible like an in person course, if that makes any sense.

Carol Impara:

So there's a part of the regulations that says that the same standards of quality for an in person course are going to be found in your online course. And I think at the core of your teaching, you... I hope that faculty can embrace that, but understand that there's a lot of great things that happen in person, which can happen just because it's natural that this kind of interaction happens when a group of people get together, and the faculty member does not necessarily have to set it up.

Carol Impara:

For instance, the faculty member doesn't necessarily have to set up students meeting each other and talking to each other, checking out instructions with each other, or forming a community, because students kind of do that naturally. And the faculty member doesn't have to be told to welcome a student when they walk in a room or maybe give an introduction, because it's natural, right? When somebody comes in, you say hi to them. Or when you look up from your teaching and you see that there's questioning looks, you stop and you explain sort of what's going on.

Carol Impara:

The difficulty with online teaching is that you don't have that immediate personal feedback. And so I think one of the precepts of online teaching is that it really pays to be conscious of all these interactions that naturally take place in person and to try to consciously build them into your course. And so, what we do is we suggest people write announcements, or before they include handouts or PowerPoints or videos that they give a short introductory paragraph where they introduce the extra materials to their students. And then the whole concept of regular and effective contact is all about trying to foster a sense of community in your courses that may happen naturally in person, but in an online course, you have to consciously build it in.

Catherine McKee:

Well, those are great points, Carol. And the only thing I'd even really say is, in SPOT, I get a lot of questions about, "Well, how do I even start putting my SPOT class together?" And I always tell them, "Just look at your regular syllabus. Your face to face class syllabus is a great place for you to start building your distance learning class. You're still communicating the same objectives and the same content and the same materials, you just have to find a way to do it in a different way." Keeping in mind the things that Carol just mentioned.

Sun Ezzell:

Thank you so much. That's really helpful for me to hear as well. I feel like I'm experiencing this strange balance between being so grateful that we have the technology to work through this time and be connected with each other, but there's also a lot of grief about not being in face to face classes with our students, not being face to face with each other. I was wondering, even though it doesn't work to go online with every discipline or every department, do you think there are maybe some advantages to online teaching that might not be there for face to face classes?

Carol Impara:

I think that some faculty member find to their delight that there are some good things about online teaching. For instance, we've probably all had the experience of throwing out a discussion question and trying to get a discussion going, and finding that maybe one or two people in a group consistently respond. And faculty have a lot of different ways of addressing that, but in an online course, a discussion is, well, typically is graded, and so everybody contributes. And sometimes students feel better about contributing because they're allowed the time to think about what they're going to say. So, I think sometimes as a faculty member, you're wondering if students aren't contributing to a discussion because they're disengaged. But a lot of times I think they're just self-conscious and they want the opportunity to plan out what they're going to say. And some of them just aren't as experienced doing that in a quick spoken context, but they can do it very well in a written context. So sometimes you find that there's a lot of really great points being made in an online discussion.

Catherine McKee:

And as an introvert, I can say that when I was in a classroom, I avoided speaking unless absolutely necessary. I avoided making eye contact with the press professor for fear that he or she would call on me. I only raised my hand if absolutely necessary. But I think for introverts, online classes and online discussions are very freeing, because no one's looking at them and the shy people can speak up and they can, as Carol said, take some time to write something down and really formulate a thought before they have to type it in.

Carol Impara:

Another thing that I find is, online it's easier for students to, I guess, show things that are in their immediate vicinity. And that might not be phrased very well, but here's an example. I teach nutrition and I usually ask students to bring a nutrition label to class. And some people forget, some people use what I have, some people just grab whatever they have. But in an online class, especially because everybody has their phone, it's very easy for students to be able to get examples that pertain to their real life to share. And of course, I'm not asking them to share really personal stuff, but I am asking for them to find a nutrition label and make a comment on it. And everybody participates in that. It's much simpler in a lot of ways than it is when you're trying to have that kind of discussion in school.

Sun Ezzell:

Thank you. Just hearing you talk about this right now is making me feel so much more excited about online. I think I've been stuck in the missing face to face part of things.

Carol Impara:

Yeah. And there are some... Now, I'm not very tech savvy. So, first of all, my usual line is, if I can do it, anybody can do it, because I'm truly not tech savvy. There are some cool things that Michelle Newhart is the person who can really help you with, which can allow you to still see your students if they wish to participate. I think there's an app called Flipgrid that you can do discussions with, where you can tape your self. I'm having my careers in nutrition students, where we had to move it online, so I'm making them do elevator speeches, and I'm having them use Flipgrid to do it, so we'll see how that goes.

Carol Impara:

There is technology, but I would urge you not to get intimidated by the technology, not to feel that you have to incorporate everything. I find that I usually incorporate something new, one new thing maybe, every semester. I don't rush into it and try to make the perfect course. I find sometimes faculty, especially faculty who have been teaching a long time and are very experienced and they really know what they're doing in their in-person class, get frustrated when they feel like they're kind of back to being newbies in the online environment. So, nobody expects somebody who's teaching online the first time to be able to do it exactly and feel exactly the same way that they felt when they were teaching their in person course, especially if they've been teaching for many years.

Catherine McKee:

Agreed.

Carol Impara:

But it does come to you. One interesting thing about online, I think, is that it's very visual. One way to think about it is in terms of the content page and what kind of visuals you can bring to it. And so, that's kind of fun, because then you start sort of looking at how you provide information in a different way.

Catherine McKee:

And, Sun, I did have some concerns. I had three online classes already this semester, and two face to face, and my last day on campus with my face to face students was Monday, March 17th, I think, right before we transitioned to temporary remote instruction. And talking to those two classes, telling them, "Okay, this is what we think may be happening." And actually having them practice some discussions, online discussion questions and online quizzes, just to kind of get them ready to go online, several of them told me after class, "Hey, I could've signed up for this class and taken it online, but I really wanted to take it in the classroom." And so, I felt bad about that and I worried about those students. I thought, how well are they going to make a transition? And for the most part, they've done pretty well. One of my classes is doing shockingly well. Here I am bragging about them in a podcast. But their transition to online has been really, really successful. So I'm just really proud of that group of students and for all of them, for just hanging in there and giving it a try.

Sun Ezzell:

That's so great to hear. What is it, do you think, that helped make that transition easier for the students that they had a chance to practice in class first?

Catherine McKee:

I think that helped. I think it helped, also, that I was encouraging with them and saying, "Hey, we don't know how this is going to work. We don't know how long this is going to last, but we're all going to be in it together and you can always reach out and contact me." And I think probably most, if not all faculty have been in contact with their students seven days a week often, to try to keep them moving along and not lose them.

Catherine McKee:

Other than that, I think maybe I just lucked out and got two really great groups of students. But I've been really pleasantly surprised at how well they've made the transition.

Sun Ezzell:

And what it sounds like you're talking about again, is humanizing your course.

Catherine McKee:

That helps. And I think there's some benefit to them having seen me and interacted with me and had a face in addition to the photo to put a with me on the announcements they get from me, et cetera. I'm sure there is some of that. And there's a course that's actually called, and Carol helped me out on this, humanizing your online course, or something like that.

Carol Impara:

Yes, that's it.

Catherine McKee:

Which I would really like to take.

Carol Impara:

Yeah. I actually moved an in person course online this semester and I kept it synchronous because I had about 10 guest speakers signed up. And so I wanted them to hear the guest speakers, that's kind of the point of it. And before we moved online, first of all, I assured them that I was an experienced online teacher, so I would be able to figure stuff out with them and that I wanted to keep them engaged. And I had already kind of set up my in person course to have a variety of activities that we were doing online anyway, because soon one of the things that you discover as an online teacher is some things are really convenient. Like it's very convenient to, like I said, the discussions, it's very convenient to allow students to be able to read everybody's posts, and it's easy to grade it when it's in Canvas as well, because SpeedGrader is actually a really nice tool.

Carol Impara:

And so, I was doing some discussions online anyway. And so, we have these synchronous class meetings and the class is free to, to ask questions and comment in the chat and feels very interactive. I learned how to use breakout rooms in Zoom. Oo I'm sort of running this course in the synchronous way, but there's also these asynchronous elements that were there anyway. And so, we just kept them.

Sun Ezzell:

That sounds very cool. A really nice balance, like the best of both worlds.

Catherine McKee:

And, Sun, I think it helps also when traditional face to face professors use Canvas in their face to face classes. In my face to face classes, I don't know how I'd stay organized without having stuff in Canvas. I have handouts posted there, I'm killing a lot fewer trees, because I'm not giving out a lot of paper in my classes because everything is posted on Canvas. The PowerPoint slides for the class are posted there, so they can see them and print them if they want to keep them to bring them to class. It's just a really great way to help deliver a face to face class also.

Carol Impara:

And so if you have set up your face to face class like that, then you're halfway there to get to your online class. You're not all the way there, you can't just say, "Okay, online students, access the materials and go forth." You've got to figure out what you normally do in an in person class and kind of insert yourself in there, and that's that humanizing part. But, once you already have that organized, then you really and truly are several steps ahead to get your course ready for online.

Sun Ezzell:

It's so interesting to hear about what the experience has been like for you two, with your own classes. Thank you for sharing that, I really appreciate it. I was wondering, this has been such an overwhelming, stressful, challenging time in many ways. I was wondering if you felt like you've discovered something positive out of this whole experience? Are there any things that are turning out to be pretty great that we might not have discovered otherwise?

Catherine McKee:

Well, I'll start, and that is by saying I've never used Zoom so much in my entire life. And, I guess the new term is becoming a Zoom-bie as opposed to a zombie, because we're in so many Zoom meetings constantly. I don't know how much I will incorporate Zoom into my classes. I do not plan to do synchronous lectures. I think that kind of defeats the purpose of online learning in some ways, but I'm getting more comfortable with it. I may be offering, say, Zoom office hours with my students. That's something I'm thinking about. Hugo Aguilera introduced me to a cool kind of chat tool called Pronto, that I've been trying out with my students and it's a way for them to have informal chats that I can see about the class and reach out to each other and say, "Hey, do you want to get together to study?" So Pronto is kind of cool.

Catherine McKee:

But I also want to say that, here, Carol and I have been teaching online for a long time and we made our transition of our face to face classes to online. But, I want to recognize that there are so many professors out there who don't teach online and maybe don't even use Canvas, and somehow they transitioned their courses online too. And so, I think they deserve a lot of recognition for all of the work that they've put in to move their courses online. It's going to be easier for Carol and for me, than for a lot of people out there. And so, they should be recognized for all their hard work.

Carol Impara:

Definitely. I know, actually, I guess, I don't want to call it a silver lining exactly, but I think this transition helps faculty kind of understand online teaching a little bit better and can kind of allow them to relate to online teachers a little bit better, because a lot of faculty really love that in person interaction and have kind of said, "I'm not ever teaching online." But what that means is that you have a whole group of faculty that kind of don't maybe understand some of the things that online can bring. And so, even if faculty decide that they don't want to teach online ever again, they will have been exposed to some things that might make their teaching interesting or more efficient. And I think that that's probably a positive.

Catherine McKee:

Yeah, agreed.

Sun Ezzell:

It has been really amazing to see everybody rising to the occasion. We certainly owe both of you and so many folks who have supported us through this process, our undying gratitude. So thank you both so much.

Catherine McKee:

Well, I think a lot of attention should go to Michelle, Hugo, and Eva, in the FCLT, they've really gone above and beyond, they've done a really great job for all of us.

Carol Impara:

Yeah, they... Boy, that first transition, they were just working all the time. It was pretty amazing how fast they got stuff together and got training ready for faculty.

Sun Ezzell:

That really makes you feel proud to work at Mt. SAC, doesn't it?

Catherine McKee:

Yup. Sure does.

Carol Impara:

Yes.

Sun Ezzell:

Is there anything else you'd like to share on the podcast before we close?

Carol Impara:

Well, I just wanted to kind of mention that we are in this amazing transition, this very fast paced transition, in which it has felt sometimes like the rules change a little bit. But Mt. SAC has really tried to stick with its shared governance process, and I have to take my hat off to the Academic Senate president, Chisa Uyeki, and the Academic Senate Exec Board, and the Faculty Association officers who have worked so hard to try to keep faculty concerns foremost and to adhere to the process where you have room for faculty deliberation, basically. So many of these processes that we're going through right now have been sort of determined, or at least had great input by faculty. I am really grateful that we haven't sort of been dictated to, as far as that goes. It sometimes means that you don't turn quite as fast as you think you could, but it also, it's really been very fast moving. So just trying to insert a little bit of deliberation into the process has been helpful.

Catherine McKee:

And, and I think a lot of... I hope a lot of faculty have appreciation for what Chisa and the Academic Senate Board, and also the Association have been trying to do on behalf of faculty. Because, I can't imagine that Joan and Chisa have gotten a lot of sleep recently.

Carol Impara:

Yeah, really.

Catherine McKee:

They've been in a lot of meetings and doing a lot of work and having a lot of concerns from variety of angles being expressed to them. I really do appreciate all the hard work and time they've put in.

Carol Impara:

Me too. Very much so.

Sun Ezzell:

Well, Carol and Catherine, thank you both so much for being here on the podcast today. I know I speak for everyone on campus when I say, thank you for your incredible work, your support, your encouragement through this time. We're so grateful to have you as our colleagues. Thank you so much.

Carol Impara:

Thank you, Sun. It's been a pleasure.

Catherine McKee:

Thanks, sun. Thanks for helping explain a little bit of what we do.

Christina Barsi:

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