What does innovation in the classroom actually mean?

Innovation is a big word that can take on many specific meanings within many contexts but basically comes down to implementing changes in something that is already established by introducing new methods, ideas or products. We tend to think of innovation as the creation of something brand new that completely revolutionizes the way we do or think of something but it can also be thought of as putting ideas new to you into practice. When we think of innovation in these terms, it is easy to see how stepping back, re-thinking and trying something new can lead to discovery. Sometimes these paths don't lead where we expect, sometimes these paths fail and we learn about what doesn't currently work, and sometimes we get it right.

I recently attended the [UAF Center ICE three-day Lean Launch Startup Workshop](#) to find out which idea/research/ product has real potential for success (for business or otherwise) and I found there were some takeaways that I could try in my teaching practice.

Lean launch methodology is a structured process to help you determine if an idea is worth developing based on extensive customer feedback through open-ended questioning. A lot of assumptions are made when you have an idea that you bring to others. It can be risky to fully build a solution for a problem before establishing whether it's a real problem that needs to be solved. By finding out what the biggest struggles are for the audience in advance, before you build, your idea can be honed to help solve more realistic problems, which reduces the risk of the venture in advance. Based on extensive interviews with open questioning, assumptions are tested through a process of problem curation before continuing with development or pivoting to a new idea.

Some questions I kept asking myself during this workshop were — How can I better design my online course to be flexible enough to meet the continuously changing needs of students throughout the semester? How can I be more agile in my teaching practice to respond faster to those needs? What do students really want from my courses? What do students struggle with most and could my approach to those topics be improved? When I design my courses for online deployment, I create tons of content, assessment and learning activities delivered to students as a package experience. That's a lot of work that goes into a somewhat static thing based on a lot of assumptions of what I think students should learn

and I rarely change it much once the semester starts — is there a way to set up the course so I could respond faster without overburdening myself with too much of an extra development load? New directions, technologies and ideas can be introduced to help support those interactions to some extent. What isn't static is my interaction with students during class.

I think in our teaching practice, where possible, finding ways to learn more about our students, what they want out of class, where they are going in their careers, what potential learning barriers they may have, and concepts they are struggling with, and how all of these change during the semester can help us be more agile in our response for engaging them in topics and activities that make a difference. It's easier to do this in a face-to-face course perhaps and more of a challenge to continually assess and be flexible when teaching online. I already survey students at the beginning of class but next semester, I plan to meet with them individually instead at the start and again during the semester. I'm also going to ask students to reflect about their learning experience mid-week (not just at the end of the assignment) in a Slack channel or Google Doc and poll students more often. Using open questioning may especially help uncover concerns I may have not anticipated. I'm going to focus more teaching strategy based on pain points, interests and concerns of students before the assessment activities start rather than as a response to performance. I always mention that my course schedule is subject to change with notice but, since students will be shaping the path our course is on to a greater extent, I may have to place more emphasis on communicating that idea. Also, keeping established course objectives in sight and utilizing content I have already produced in advance where it makes sense and getting rid of it where it doesn't.

Maybe this effort will result in trying new tools for activities, integrating more current events in discussion, iterating through subjects in new ways or finding new ways to personalize the learning experience. At the very least, I will be more in-tune with student needs much earlier. It may also be that I have developed content that is not as helpful or pertinent to learning as I thought and going through this process will help me decide where I need to pivot my teaching strategy to meet the needs of my students.