The CELTA Course, 100% Online at Saint Mary's University
– A Trainee Experience

A recent graduate from our full-time, 5-week, 100% online CELTA course at Saint Mary's University kindly shares her experience of taking the course.

I had known about CELTA for a few years before finally signing up for the online course through the Language Centre at SMU. As terrible as this year has been on a global scale, the pandemic turned out to be the perfect push to take the course online: first, there was no four-hour commute to and from the closest CELTA Center to me in Toronto; second, I had prior face-to-face and blended teaching experience, but was interested in learning more about the world of online teaching; and finally, the course's intensity proved to be a welcome distraction from 2020.

Before the Course:

After sending in an application and pre-interview task, one of the course tutors set up an interview with me. I was nervous for the interview, but it turned out to be a relaxed video conversation about my motivations for taking the CELTA and my answers on the pre-course task. The task sets you up nicely for the interview so if you think carefully about the grammar tasks and your motivations for taking the course, you'll do just fine.

Once you've made it through the interview, it's time to prepare; that is, brush up on English grammar and language teaching methodology. Luckily, you're not left to your own devices. The CELTA trainers will provide you with a list of fantastic resources and a pre-course task which will introduce you much of the content you'll be looking at throughout your course. I highly recommend Jeremy Harmer's *How to Teach English* for basic teaching methodology and Michal Swan's *Practical English Usage* for grammar, though the latter is quite technical and can be hard to read cover-to-cover. Finding resources mid-pandemic was a bit tricky, but I was able to use online resources, local bookshops with no-contact pick up, and library resources to collect everything I needed.

I'd also recommend trying to get to know the platform the course will be using ahead of time. Even without early access to Teams, Moodle, or Zoom, information is abundant online; there are many informational videos and blog posts to help you learn the platform. The content of the course—that is, English language teaching—has a steep learning curve, but so does the technological aspect of an online CELTA. It's best to prepare for both aspects of the course, the teaching content and the online platform.

If you introduce yourself to English teaching and grammar, learn a bit about your platform, and take your time with the pre-course task, you'll be ready to go on day one.

The Course:

The tutors on the SMU CELTA course opted to stretch the usual four-week syllabus into five weeks for the online version. This meant that we had four in-(virtual)-class days, plus an independent study day on Wednesdays as a break from Microsoft Teams and teaching. The in-class sessions were structured much like previous in-person CELTA courses: in the mornings, we taught volunteer students in the mornings and had a feedback discussion as a group; in the afternoons, we had a live class session followed by online units to complete. On teaching days, half the CELTA trainees teach, and the other half observe and provide feedback after class. The next day, the roles are reversed. On our course, we taught twice a week and observed our peers twice a week. We also had to complete four written assignments throughout the course.

The biggest difference between teaching in person and teaching online is the platform. My colleagues and I lamented the loss of a whiteboard, for example, and we found the online alternatives less than ideal. We also noticed that nonverbal communication was more difficult online—the gestures, body language, and posturing that are crucial for communication, especially at lower levels, can be hard to convey through a webcam. Preparing for an online class is also time consuming. Creating all the PowerPoints, handouts, materials, and backup materials for when the technology inevitably fails takes a ton of time and energy. On top of your lesson materials, there are three to four teaching forms per lesson which detail your lesson action plan.

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Having said all that, an online classroom has many advantages. The entire Internet is at your fingertips and with it comes applications, quiz websites, and YouTube videos. I also found that comradery between the CELTA students and our volunteer English learners didn't suffer from the online format of the course. The trainees were able to forge friendships and spend time talking about our lesson plans, teaching experiences, and life beyond the course. The volunteer students quickly befriended one another. Even though we weren't in the same room, it didn't take much time to adapt to the e-classroom. In the final two weeks of the course the online environment felt perfectly normal.

As a follow-up to teaching practice, we held feedback sessions after every lesson. These conversations, and the written tutor feedback which follows, are incredibly valuable. This is an opportunity for your peers to comment on the strengths of your teaching and areas you could improve upon. Their perspectives will help you create stronger lessons as the course goes on. My teaching practice peers were an incredibly kind and empathetic bunch, and any constructive criticism they had for my lessons was thoughtful and, crucially, helpful. We created a collegial, not competitive, environment. We often sent encouraging messages to one another and met up virtually outside of class to plan our lessons as a teaching team.

The written feedback from the course tutors is also extremely valuable. Your tutors will pinpoint your strengths, note your areas to improve upon, and offer actionable advice on how to make your next lesson better. The CELTA tutors have a wealth of knowledge and experience and their unique perspectives and teaching expertise are one of the most important resources you have on the course. Don't be afraid to ask for help and to ask questions.

The Wednesday breaks were an essential breather from all the screen time we were getting, though they weren't days off from the course. We were expected to watch online videos of experienced teachers and complete courses through CELTA's Moodle website. Wednesday downtime was an excellent idea on the tutors' part; the extra planning time and the online components were integral course components. I was apprehensive about the Moodle lessons at first, but I soon learned that the online units weren't pre-recorded lectures. They provided interactive and engaging content about teaching practice.

The written assignments are straightforward and cover topics from identifying learner needs, grammar and language analysis, to a final reflection on your growth as a teacher during the course. The hardest part about the written assignments is time management; with all the other overlapping and time-consuming components of the course, you need to find time to write the assignments. Since weekends are slightly less busy than weekdays, Saturday and Sunday became my assignment days.

It took the first two weeks to acclimatize to the rigorous workload and teaching methodologies, but we settled into a routine and felt far less overwhelmed as a group come week three. This was also the week where we switched classes; my group began teaching the elementary students in the first half of the course and moved to the intermediate level for the second half. Since we were already used to the workload, both tutors, the platform, and the assignments, we didn't take long to adapt to the new level.

Final thoughts and tips:

As you can see from the description above, the online course lived up to the CELTA's reputation as a rigorous and intense English language teaching certificate. I'll leave you with some actionable tips for keeping on top of your workload.

1. *Organize your files*: the course has many moving parts and organization is key to completing it successfully. For the in-person course, the tutors recommend keeping all the materials you'll need in two binders. For the online version, I used a folder on my laptop which soon morphed into a web of subfolders and sub-subfolders for assignments, live sessions (afternoon lessons), teaching practice, CELTA Moodle lessons, and forms.

2. *Be open to feedback*: the essential part of the term 'constructive criticism' is the first word, 'constructive.' The tutors and your CELTA trainee peers are there to help you develop into a stronger English teacher so listen to them and welcome their feedback. On the flip side, be sure to offer helpful feedback in return, including strengths and constructive feedback. You'll learn a lot from your tutors and peers on the course.

3. *Take care of yourself*: this tip is last, but by no means the least important. The CELTA is intense, so make sure you sleep well, eat properly, and take some time for yourself. Get out for a walk, do some yoga, make time for friends and family. The CELTA will take a ton of time, but you need some downtime as well.

The CELTA at SMU was an excellent experience. Our first lessons were good, but our final lessons were so much stronger after a month of study and practice. This course will prepare you for the world of English teaching regardless of whether that world is in three dimensions or in pixelated form.
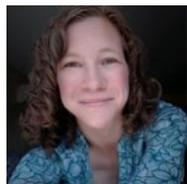
Courtney is a PhD candidate in English literature and writing studies and has been teaching English literature for the past seven years. Her interest in languages and teaching English for Academic Purposes led her to take the CELTA course through Saint Mary's University in July 2020.

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