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Working Smarter, Not Harder: Setting Up an Online Course to Save Time!

📅 August 10, 2022

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Faculty in higher education have found themselves with more classes, more students, and overall less time and methods for saving time. Therefore, using time more efficiently has become necessary to accomplish our goals. Below are strategies that faculty can use to effectively allocate time, maximize output for students, and minimize time spent revising or creating course materials throughout the semester or academic year. Each of these recommendations require quite a bit of work up front, but the return on investment can be valuable during the busy semester and academic year.

Build out the entire course

Faculty members are privileged to review student evaluations prior to the following semester as well as monitor how well students navigate assignments and course materials as the semester progresses. As a result, faculty can apply those changes to assignments and have them loaded into the online course shell and ready for student access prior to the start of the semester. By preparing in advance, faculty can negate the need to continually prepare and load content as the semester progresses. Additionally, this practice can prove to create a less frustrating experience for students, as well as reduce student questions, because all content and assignments are accessible starting day one of the course.

Rubrics with saved comments

Many faculty members use rubrics for scoring specific assignments as a means to ensure students understand the requirements of an assignment, but also provide a method for easily scoring an assignment. However, in the spirit of thorough feedback, many educators also choose to comment on student work as well. Many times, the same comment is required across multiple student projects and the time spent repeatedly typing the same comment can add an extensive amount of time to the overall grading process. A method for maximizing time spent scoring assignments is to create thorough comments that can be used multiple times for different levels of student work. By creating a list of comments that can be copied/pasted for students, faculty can move more efficiently through the grading process thereby saving time.

Scheduled notifications

Each semester is riddled with questions from students in each course, but anticipating these questions prior to the semester starting can be beneficial for both you and the success of students in the course. Additionally, predicting the fact that students will inevitably attempt to turn in work late can also be avoided, not completely eradicated, but diminished. Results as described previously can be achieved by preparing and scheduling the release of notifications throughout the semester. This can be achieved through your online learning system, email, or social media networks. Simply prepare the notification for each individual class, schedule for the release of the notifications, and then forget them. For example, if your class requires a large research paper, schedule a notification for when students should begin research for the paper and then schedule a reminder a week prior to the due date for the paper. Scheduled notifications can also be helpful when group projects are required to nudge students to contact their group member(s). There are a multitude of ways that scheduled notifications can benefit the instructor of the course; however, the unintended consequence is that many times the quality of the student work improves.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Applying UDL as a foundation for course design can circumvent many accessibility issues that students may encounter in an online course throughout a semester. UDL can be broken down into three main considerations for course design:

1. Multiple means of representation
2. Multiple means of action and expression
3. Multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2022)

Multiple means of representation include the way that information is presented to students; therefore, ensure that in your course students have access to materials and content in multiple formats such as through video instruction, reading materials, PowerPoint presentations, videos of the practice or exemplars, and webinars. Additionally, students should have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge or mastery of the content in multiple ways. It is not necessary to include multiple means of action and expression for every assignment; however, students should be provided with different types of assignments throughout the course. Finally, students should engage in the class in a variety of ways to include discussions, independent work, or group work. Instructors should differentiate their modalities for assessment and provide students with varied opportunities to access and assess their understanding of the course material.

Accessibility

Faculty may receive specific accommodations from the University Disability Services for Students, however, it is not mandatory for students to disclose a disability. As best practice, all online course content should automatically include the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Standards for Accessible Design*. Hyperlinks should lead with the title of the link (e.g. To view UDL components visit <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/> (<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>)), or better yet, directly hyperlink the text so that students can directly click and be redirected to the website which is especially helpful if there are lengthy URLs (e.g. [UDL Components \(https://udlguidelines.cast.org/\)](https://udlguidelines.cast.org/)). It is also best to utilize a font like Times New Roman, sparsely use bolded or italicized text, and avoid use of highly contrasting colors (e.g. red/green or blue/yellow). If using images, be sure to include an image description. Clear audio is also a necessity when posting lectures or other items that include a video component and it is best to limit video content to no longer than 10 minutes in length and include a transcription and/or closed-captioning.

Google Drive

A Google Drive can be used to support the demands placed on faculty in higher education to remain organized and maintain essential documents. Google Drive provides opportunities to quickly give feedback, recover old versions of documents, collaborate live with others, manipulate settings for multiple levels of access, and search and locate files. As faculty, documents are constantly updated and shared among professionals through collaborative research and teaching. Google Drive provides an opportunity to skip the back and forth with emails. A document shared with another professional remains updated through live editing and the receiving individual is able to access it at any time. Google Drive also allows you to create folders for organizational purposes. Creating folders for each project or class can help group documents together so that they are easily located, edited, or copied. Using Google Drive to keep track of documents for courses taught allows for quick editing and less work over time. For example, using a live Google Drive link within your active syllabus document allows you to make edits without having to re-upload a new file to the online learning platform. Google Drive provides freedom to access materials from any device connected to wifi as opposed to being bound to only one computer in which all materials are saved.

Informational videos

Faculty can create overview videos that provide students with in-depth information on how to access resources (e.g. how to search for items in the library, how to access the student writing center, APA formatting). Informational videos can also be made to walk through the syllabus and course expectations or outline the expectations of major course assignments. For example, a discussion surrounding a previously submitted, de-identified exemplar assignment can be shared showing the alignment to the assignment rubric. These videos are great references that students can revisit at any point during the semester.

Faculty members have multiple responsibilities related to teaching, scholarship, and service, and working more efficiently has the potential to increase productivity if forethought into course design, assessment, and student contact is completed.

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