Baseline Course Design During COVID

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During the past three decades, courses have increasingly incorporated online components such as learning management systems (Canvas), digital content, asynchronous interactivity, and more. Research and best practices have emphasized the importance of clear, easily navigable, and appealing course design in online components of courses. Recent research conducted by various entities within the university has validated earlier findings about the aspects of course design that most contribute to student satisfaction and engagement (and, potentially, to student success) in coursework that incorporates remote learning.[1] As we move into the spring 2021 semester, it is important that instructors assess simple elements of their courses to provide as seamless an experience as possible for students during the pandemic.

Primary themes surrounding student needs and expectations revolve around the following:

1) Clearly described and meaningful course assignments which are tied to course outcomes.

2) Consistent course design and toolsets across multiple courses.

3) Responsive and empathetic faculty.

A consistent theme of the research findings is an emphasis on reducing friction in course design. "Reducing friction" does not require a reduction in academic rigor. Rather, it focuses on the points of struggle students have with understanding how to access and navigate course structure in order to fully engage with the content and class community. Consistent course organization from course to course, effective use of "to-do" lists, and consistent textbook platforms can all reduce the logistical burden students experience during remote learning.

In addition, good course design can alleviate the stress and anxiety that students may experience during the pandemic. Students who struggle with a course's logistics are more likely to experience anxiety that can undermine their ability to succeed. A course design that facilitates faculty-student interactions, especially in a socially-distanced environment, can help reduce feelings of isolation and anxiety.

While many of these concerns have been addressed through well-researched best practices in designing online components of courses, it is clear that the pandemic has heightened the need to attend to them. Because many courses are being converted to an online format, and because large numbers of faculty are new to online pedagogy, teaching centers and online pedagogical specialists have identified key tips that faculty can quickly introduce into their courses when setting up their Canvas course sites to make education less confusing and anxiety producing. The following tips are meant as easy "wins" that faculty can introduce into their courses to make the learning experience better for both the students and for themselves. By leveraging Canvas course site design to clarify expectations and facilitate ease of use, faculty can reduce the cognitive and emotional load of remote learning.

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1   Recent studies generated include *Online Education: Student Expectations and Experiences, Phase Two: Interview Results* from the Center for Evaluation, Policy, & Research; *Going Remote: Actionable Insights from Indiana University's Transition to Remote Instruction Due to COVID-19* from the eLearning Research and Practice Lab; *Student COVID-19 Transition Needs Survey 2020* and *Student COVID-19 Transition Needs Survey: Undergraduate and Graduate Students* from IUPUI's Institutional Research and Decision Support; and *Reassessing Disparities in Online Learner Student Engagement in Higher Education* by Paulsen and McCormick and published in *Educational Researcher*.

TIP #1

Use Canvas and the Canvas template with all face-to-face, hybrid, and online classes.

PRIMARY REASONING

Instructor time-saver and easy for students to navigate.

KEY BENEFITS

a. Includes tech instructions and support resources for students (e.g., setting up and logging into Zoom, Canvas orientation guides).

b. Provides basic accessible framework with commonly used sections and boilerplate language to start building your course (instead of a blank page).

c. Provides consistent navigation and design for students from course to course.

d. To take it a step further, create a campus, school, or department-specific template for added customization.

TIP #2

Post a syllabus in the Syllabus tool and publish your course at least two weeks before the start of classes.

PRIMARY REASONING

Increases transparency for students and advisors, leading to better student understanding and support.

KEY BENEFITS

a. Allows students to enter the class with a full understanding of expectations and time commitment required.

b. Gives advisors better information so they can recommend the courses based on faculty-published syllabi as students are making final scheduling adjustments.

c. Of note: in a published course, modules can be independently published or unpublished; it is not necessary to release all the course content before the start of the semester.

TIP #3

Respond to student communication within 24 hours and have regular synchronous or asynchronous check-ins scheduled throughout the semester to gauge student confidence and concerns.

PRIMARY REASONING

Meets IU's commitment to engage authentically with students and meets accreditation requirements for substantive faculty interaction.

KEY BENEFITS

a. Prevents an online course from being perceived as a "correspondence course."

b. Establishes a "culture of caring" for students in courses of all modalities, leading to better student outcomes.

c. Creates regular opportunities for direct connection with content expert, reflecting best practices in teaching and learning research.

TIP #4

Use the assignments tool with due dates, encourage students to download the Boost app, and log all grades in Canvas.

PRIMARY REASONING

Facilitates students' ability to self-manage across all of their courses and creates an effective communication channel between instructor and student.

KEY BENEFITS

a. Creates an entry in the Canvas gradebook for each assignment and allows the instructor to record a grade whether the assignment is submitted on Canvas or not.

b. Adding due dates to assignments auto-populates your syllabus, the Canvas calendar, and students' Canvas to-do lists, which helps students organize work and regulate priorities. As more instructors use this, students can see a more complete list of their assigned tasks across different courses.

c. Allows students to use the Boost app to get reminders about due dates, which IU research has shown improves academic performance.

d. Provides a mechanism to give frequent and substantive feedback, including prompt recording of grades, giving students the ability to know how they're doing in their classes and when they need to ask for extra help.

e. Allows instructors to share assignments with advisors for more targeted student support.

TIP #5

Simplify course navigation.

1. Use the modules tool for student access to:
   Pages | Assignments | Discussions | Files | Quizzes | Outcomes

2. And remove access to these tools from the left navigation.

PRIMARY REASONING

Streamlines where students should find everything and gives instructors data-driven insight into student practices and behavior.

KEY BENEFITS

a. Improves usability for better student experience.

b. Limits where students can "get lost in the weeds."

c. Streamlines where students should find everything by pointing to a single "front door" to the course.

d. Allows instructors to utilize the Canvas analytics dashboard to identify when students need additional guidance.

> ### *EXTRA TIP*
> Name the module to align content with learning outcomes.