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Organizing the Online Course

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Hi My name is Kathleen Burke, and I've been an adjunct here in the Fine Arts Department at Winthrop for 10 years now. I've been teaching online courses since 2010, and use Blackboard as my primary course organizational tool in my face-to-face classes as well. I've taken nearly all of the Blackboard training courses provided here at Winthrop over the years, but I wouldn't call myself an expert; I'm pretty skilled, but I still bug Kimarie or Kim at least once or twice a semester with questions - and they always come up with the answer to my issue - which is often user error! I also teach online courses at USC-Upstate, and was fortunate to have taken a summer course a couple of years ago in Online Best Practices, which helped me to refine some of my process.

And full-disclosure: in a previous career, I designed websites for commercial clients, which is all about making a user-friendly tool for their customers. That approach -- making the site serve the student user -- is what I'm here to discuss with you today. My primary goal is to make my course structure as simple for students to work with as possible. But this approach has benefits for us faculty, too: by creating a logical structure, we can streamline our work process, and minimize some of the common frustrations folks have with teaching online. You should also know that I consider my courses works-in-progress and continue to refine them each time, although I spent the first couple of years refining much more than I have to do now.

There are many ways to organize your BB courses - and I think, as faculty, we have a big advantage in organizing the content, since it is basically the same as preparing materials for a face-to-face class. It's the organization of the delivery method that differs most. Now, I would never say that my approach is the best or only, but it is working for me and I hope that some of these tips are useful to you.

Logical Redundancy

I repeat important information in logical locations. For instance, I have the syllabus collected as a single document, and I provide a printable version of it for students. But how many students really read the syllabus? So I repeat some of the important information where they will see it. For instance, I repeat the Late Policy for assignments at the top of the Assignments page, and I place the Exam "do-over" policy at the top of the Exams page. Also, my contact information is in the syllabus, but also as a separate page with it's own link called "Faculty Information."

Home page = Calendar

I make the Calendar the Home page - students have told me that this really helps them to keep on track. Yes, it may not be terribly pretty, but I am definitely on the side of function over style when it comes to online course organization. If you have room and want to jazz things up, add a picture or two.

Orientation tasks

I find that a well-designed first week sets the tone for the whole semester, and orientation is a big part of that. I collect all of the Orientation tasks in a clearly labeled area: (ex.: Welcome! START HERE).

To start things off, I provide a "welcome to class" message and links to a couple of Blackboard tutorials. Then I have students complete a simple Blackboard and Course Orientation Quiz, and create an Introductory post to the Discussion Forum, which includes a photo of themselves. These tasks are required, so that students have low-risk assignment in the first few days, but have to get used to navigating the site and meeting deadlines. (In some classes, I make one of these tasks count towards extra credit.)

Even though it can be time-consuming in large classes, I send a personal email response to each student's introductory post in the first week. I've learned that this ice-breaking communication goes a long way to fostering more class participation all semester, and it encourages more students to communicate with me.

Communications

As much as is practical, send class communications through the Announcements tool. Many of these communications recur each semester and the Announcements tool will provide an archive for streamlining some of your work in future! I send a weekly introductory email each Monday that briefly discusses the content and tasks for the week, and includes reminders of due dates and other pertinent info. I also usually start out with some overall praise for the class - reporting good overall results on a recent exam, or remarking on thoughtful discussion. I don't have a regular email the rest of the week, but send them as needed - and I try very hard to keep it to no more than one additional email per week, so as not to overwhelm the students. Most of the other emails are one-on-one communications, but I save and post questions that can apply to everyone in an "FAQ" section on the Discussion Forum.

Because I am on campus, I have regular office hours - and I remind students of my availability several times throughout the semester. I've also included my office hours and location in the signature of my emails. For courses I teach remotely, I offer 'virtual' office hours by phone or Skype, by appointment.

Discussions

How you handle discussions depends, in large part, on the type of course and the number of students in it, I think. Some instructors I've spoken to make mandatory online discussion a large percentage of the student's grade (up to 30%, in some cases). My classes tend to be large – 45-60 students, and I confess that I have not had a lot of success making discussion a mandatory part of class - but for me, using discussion as the only (or primary) source of earning extra credit works fairly well. And to keep myself sane, I don't feel the need to respond to every comment - I encourage students to converse with one another, and step into the conversations when I feel motivated to direct the discussion, add some public praise or encouragement, or correct some misinformation. And I give specific deadlines for discussion topics, so that I have to evaluate and assign points on just a few designated days. In my weekly intro email, I often include a discussion topic question as a prompt, especially when participation is lagging.

I provide starter questions in the Discussion Forums, but encourage - and challenge - students to start their own discussion topics. I generally give a point or two of additional extra credit for this kind of initiative, if they've put genuine thought into the task.

Course Materials & Assignments

Depending on the course, and the level of experience of the online students, I think that presenting all the course materials at once can be overwhelming - especially for first year students, or students who are new to the online experience. I teach mostly foundation-level courses, so I break the content into testing units, and generally only display the first one or two units at the start of class. I release the next units a week or two before students should start working on those materials. However, the entire semester is mapped out on the calendar from day one.

I try to have something due at least every other week - a test or an assignment. Less frequent due dates allow students to become disengaged from the course. I always use a rubric for grading, and I include those rubrics in the assignment instructions.

Testing

Because we don't have a dedicated testing site for online students on campus, nor is there a practical way of policing students during tests, my tests are open-book (but time-limited), and I try to include a good deal of critical-thinking-type questions. (This is something that I hope changes - I would like to have a more secure, dedicated location for online testing.)

CYA!

Two boilerplate items added to the end of the syllabus:

Third Party Web Sites and Information

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Tips for Organizing the Online Course – (handout)

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1. **Logical Redundancy**
    a. **Repeat important information in logical locations**

2. **Home page = Calendar**

3. **Orientation tasks**
    a. **"Welcome – START HERE"**
    b. **Orientation Quiz**
    c. **Introductory Post**
    d. **Individual emails**

4. **Communications**
    a. **Announcement Tool**
    b. **Weekly Intro**
    c. **FAQ section**
    d. **Office hours**

5. **Discussions**
    a. **Credit or extra credit?**
    b. **Provide starter prompts & challenges**

6. **Course Materials & Assignments**
    a. **Organize by units**
        i. **Rolling release dates for units**
    b. **Frequent due dates**
    c. **Use rubrics**
    d. **Transparency to students**

7. **Testing**
    a. **Open-book**
    b. **Emphasize Critical thinking**

8. **CYA!**
    For the syllabus:

- Third Party Web Sites and Information
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- DISCLAIMER: This is a college course for adults. As such, students must understand that nudity and controversial subjects are present in some works of art. Also, religion has inspired countless art works and will be discussed to put the work in context.

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