

Transcript - Dr. Jason S. Todd: Explains the importance of learning activities and interactions

Hi. This is Jay again. In this video, I'm going to discuss how to create effective learning activities and to ensure ongoing interactions with your students. In particular, here are the learning outcomes for this lecture:

[Slide is displayed with the following information]

Plan active and engaging learning activities that are clearly aligned with your learning outcomes.

Develop transparent assignments and activities for your students.

Identify tools in Brightspace that can promote active learning in your class.

Send email and instant messages through Brightspace.

Appreciate the value of providing students with recognition for their learning accomplishments.

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When many faculty are faced with the prospect of putting a course online, the first thing they think about is the content -- How will I teach the students what they need to know. While content delivery is important, that's not the end of the discussion. For any form of teaching, we need to be thinking about how to get our students to engage with that content.

Humans learn best by doing, not by listening, so active learning should be a significant part of the equation when planning any class. For online courses, active learning is even more important as it helps reduce the isolated nature of online learning.

Active learning activities can not only help your students learn that content better, they can also improve the students' sense of belonging in the course, which, as many of us know, can have a substantial impact on how the student does in the class, regardless of what they know and what they can do.

Active learning is a pretty generic term. It really applies to any task you give students that challenges them to use what they are learning. In that way, it's any activity that makes the student do more than simply memorize the content.

Now, you may be thinking to yourself, "But I have so much to teach them! There's too much content for me to cover! I don't have time for active learning!"

The research suggests that active learning needs to be a critical component of modern learning. A 2014 meta-analysis of studies on the effectiveness of active learning compared to lecturing published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences described two significant findings. First, the study found that students in lecture-only classes were 1.5 times more likely to fail than students in classes that incorporated some level of active learning.

Second, they found that students in those classes that incorporated active learning performed better on exams than the students in lecture-only classes by one-half a standard deviation.

Let's note though that these findings are not based on the idea of eliminating lecturing entirely; rather, they were looking at classes in which the faculty members had incorporated some active learning activities into the curriculum.

When considering activities to encourage active learning in your courses, you need to remember the idea of alignment: any activity must be clearly linked to one or more course-level learning outcomes as well as the more focused module-level learning outcomes that coincide with the planned activity. In other words, don't use active learning for the sake of using active learning: use it to help your students better accomplish the outcomes you've set for that class meeting. This connection needs to be clear and it needs to be spelled out for the students.

Again, there should be no mystery here. Tell the students what you want them to do, and tell them why you are having them do it. Transparency is an idea that's come up earlier in this course, but now is the best time to really delve into it.

The TILT Higher Ed project has, for the past decade, been studying and advocating a simple but profound framework for making college assignments transparent.

Transparency and alignment are tangential ideas -- both focus on the ideal of making sure students are given enough information about the coursework in order to do it to the best of their abilities. Why is this important? Because the more information they have, the better they will understand what is expected of them, and as anyone who has gone up for tenure knows, the less you know about what's expected of you, the more confused, stressed, and uncertain you are.

In order to make an assignment or activity transparent, you need to provide the students with three major pieces of information. First, you need to provide the students with an explanation of why you want them to do this particular activity. This is the purpose statement. In particular, you should tell them which skills they will be honing through this activity and/or what knowledge they will be gaining or reviewing through it. Here, to practice good alignment techniques, you need to specify which module-level and/or course-level outcomes the activity supports. You can also suggest ways this activity will benefit the students beyond your class – does it give them a chance to better learn how to make a presentation or improve their writing skills?

Second, you need to provide students with a clear and thorough description of the task you want them to do. This often appears as a checklist, and should always include specifically how best to get started with the task. It can also, for more complex tasks, include a description of how not to get started. What's critical here is that you are thorough. "Post to the weekly discussion topic" isn't thorough. But what if we said this: Remember the key here is transparency. Tell your students exactly what you expect.

Third, you need to be clear with students about how they will be evaluated on this task. Remember some of those ideas you learned in the Assessment & Measurement module. Is this an in-class activity for which they will receive a check-plus as long as they put some effort into the task? Is this an essay that will be assessed in terms of effective argument, clear writing, thorough research, and more? Either way, the students need to know before they begin.

Again, think about that tenure portfolio. You'll find some additional resources about Transparency in Learning and Teaching on the Learn More page with this video, including a template that provides good examples and guidelines for improving your assignments.

In the next module, Course Technology, you'll learn about choosing the best technology for your classes, but we need to think some about that here as well. In this module, we'll focus on those that can be done using the tools that are native to Brightspace, but remember that you're never limited to those.

If you're working through this course according the way we've organized it, you've already had some experience with these tools. At the end of Module 1, you used the Assignment tool to upload a document. For Module 2, you completed the Learning Objectives Quiz and then you completed your reflection using the Discussion tool. And, obviously, if you've used Brightspace before for your classes, you may already have been familiar with these tools. Often we think about these tools as means for students submitting more substantive assignments-- they turn in their term papers through an Assignment Submission Folder or they complete their final exam through the Quizzes tool. But you can use these for smaller, more focused, and more active assignments as well.

To put it in the terms we're focusing on for this course, remember that Assessments (things that can be used to measure whether students have achieved as certain outcome) are different Learning Activities (things that allow students to practice the knowledge and skills they are developing in your class). Despite this distinction, though, you can use the same tools in Brightspace for Assessments and Learning Activities.

Students can work in a small group to develop a three-slide presentation that describes some of the historical events that impacted the Late Romantic Era in American Literature. When they're done, they upload the presentation as an Assignment. Or they take pictures of the plants in or around their home and upload those along with each plant's scientific name. Or they record a one-minute video in which they explain the most significant economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the Assignments tool, it's important to realize just how much they can upload -- it's a lot more than just Word docs.

For some people, teaching online is almost synonymous with using discussion boards. The Discussions tool in Brightspace is a great way to have students engage in an asynchronous conversation. As you've already seen from some of your reflections, you can also set up a Discussion Topic as a Journal, meaning the posts are private for each student. Discussion Topics are also great ways to get the students to give one another feedback on essays, presentations, or other assignments. They are also useful means of interacting with the whole class. Many people have found setting up a topic that encourages students to post questions about the class or about a confusing point from the most recent lecture or just about how their week is going are effective ways to stay in touch and to humanize the course. Remember though, whatever you ask students to do on the Discussion Topic, be transparent with that assignment: Purpose + Task + Evaluation.

During the Spring of 2020, many faculty struggled to convert their complex exams into the format for Brightspace's Quizzes tool, and obviously, despite its name, the tool is intended to be used, in part, for big, summative tests. But there's much more you can do with the Quizzes tool. The most useful things I'd suggest to you here is to use it to give students a chance to practice for those big tests. Remember that those big tests and exams don't teach students anything -- they are purely for assessment purposes.

But Quizzes in Brightspace can be used as a means of providing formative assessment, too, meaning they can be used as learning activities if they are set up to do so. Quizzes can be set up to allow students to take them multiple times. You can also provide a variety of feedback to students, even for each question, so that if while taking a practice quiz they get an answer wrong, the system can give them feedback that directs them where to review the material they've misunderstood.

So we've discussed some of the ways you can engage students in active learning through Brightspace. Before we wrap up here, I'd like to talk about a few ways you can more specifically interact with your students, even if you're thousands of miles apart. These tools allow you, the instructor, to be more present for your students, and I think we all know how important that is at a school like Xavier.

The first is easy enough, but you might not realize how it works. From many places within Brightspace, you can click a button or select a menu option to email one or more students. Doing so will open a new browser window that doesn't look exactly like Gmail, but the email you send will go to the student's email address, and any response they send will go directly to your Gmail account.

You can also send students and other faculty instant messages through Brightspace. Unlike the email function, the messaging function is fully internal to Brightspace. The student will only see the message the next time they log into Brightspace, so it's not as timely as actual text messages, but it is a way to reduce the clutter in your Gmail inbox.

Lastly is something completely different, but it's an interesting and, according to the research, effective way to interact with students in order to motivate them in your class.

In Brightspace, you can use the Awards tool to create digital badges for your students. If you don't know about badges, take a look at the article on the Learn More page for this module. In short, badges are small images presented as rewards for completing some task or achieving some milestone. If you've ever owned a FitBit, you know all about badges and how they can be used to motivate people. Brightspace lets you create badges and either award them manually or automatically, based on specific criteria tied to the actions students can take in Brightspace. So, for example, you could have a badge automatically awarded for students who get at least an 85% on the unit test. Or you could award a badge to student for posting, say, five or more times to one of your discussion topics. There are lots of options. Again, we've provided some links for you to look at for more information at the end of this video.

To conclude, I'll encourage you to be transparent and present in your online classes. As we've all seen, it's easy to disconnect without that human touch. But Brightspace offers lots of means for humanizing your classes through transparency and presence.