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Building the Connective Tissue of Your Online Class

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When I met with our first-year students during on-campus orientation five weeks into their program, a student complained to me about an assignment in my online class. I didn't recognize what the student was describing, and after a few minutes I realized that it wasn't from our class at all. He had been working from the to-do list on the main page of our learning management system (LMS), receiving assignments from all of his classes in an undifferentiated list, ordered only by due date. He found it difficult to mentally sort which assignments went with which class, and he felt frustrated and ready to quit.

On the one hand, this student was an extreme example. With online orientation, most students understand how to "move" into individual courses to see assignments in context of the full site for the class. On the other hand, because distinct classrooms, different classmates, meeting times, and the visual presence of the instructor are often muted in online learning, this scenario of being adrift in a sea of deadlines and assignments is not all that unusual for online students. Whenever they "go" to different classes they do so sitting alone looking at the same screen, which can blend experiences from multiple classes in their mind. Increasingly students are using smaller phone screens and the combined to-do list of all courses as their guide

through their education. Learning becomes a never-ending stream of calendrical tasks to squeeze in between work hours and caring for family members and the many other demands of working adult students. They are doggedly getting what they need to get done finished, but the bigger story of each class gets lost in the shuffle, making the scaffolding necessary for learning and retention more difficult to build.

Since that conversation, I have been more aware of how students engage the LMS. I try to imagine what it is like to encounter the individual assignments and tasks of my class in isolation from one another as they pop up in a mixed to-do list generated by the system. Do they come across as a communal learning space or just another damn thing to get done? Can they even figure out which class the task has come from? I now work harder to communicate the connective tissue that holds together the task-oriented skeleton of the class in what appears on the to-do list. What often gets lost are the transitions between topics, where we have been and where we are going, the overall narrative arc of the class. Of course, this also easily happens in a residential class that meets once or twice a week, interrupted by six other days of busy life and other interactions. Without careful design and communication by instructors, the story of the class can be obscure to novices encountering it for the first time, whatever the setting.

In my last blog, I talked about the importance of using short faculty videos to help create a sense of the social presence of the instructor in an online class. These videos are also a great way to create connective tissue from assignment to assignment, marking the developments in learning that the instructor has seen in the class, and naming where the class has been and where they are heading. If they are placed on the same page as the task, they help the student associate which instructor and which class the assignment comes from.

This connective tissue can also be generated in textual narrative. Where I once would have an assignment that simply listed the readings and the discussion prompt for the day, now I will have several paragraphs reminding students of where we are in the course, why this topic for this day, and introducing the readings. A written mini-lecture might contextualize the moment in history that we are engaging, or why I think that this material is important, or what I hope they will learn from engaging it, or how it builds on what we have learned so far.

One of the difficulties of providing this connective tissue in asynchronous classes is that often I am creating these pieces two weeks ahead of where the majority of the class is working. I can't always draw on what happened in the last class session, like I would in a residential class. But I do my best to keep the whole story arc of the class in mind, and to clue students into our current moment, not unlike the recap of a season of television that happens before the first episode of the next series. This practice also keeps me honest about knowing the "why" for each task I set in the class so I can help students stay oriented in the midst of the continuous flow of tasks set for their learning.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/01/building-the-connective-tissue-of-your-online-class/>

