Design, Refine, & Shine: Course Prep Reminders

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In August 2025, the John Jay Teaching & Learning Center launches a new series with course preparation reminders and tips. During August 2025, we will be sharing short blogs and resource lists that support effective course design towards student-centered, inclusive, socially just teaching and learning. Save, share, and use what works for you.

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Part One: Course Contexts

Before we start to design our courses, stepping back to consider the contexts helps anchor our choices and helps us make connections between the various capacities and limitations we and our students will engage in these areas:

- Modalities
- Student Identities
- Prior Knowledge & Skills Needs
- Accommodations

By **modalities**, I am referring to the spaces and times we teach. In person, face-to-face classroom courses offer a specific set of interactions and resources that include peer work, unmediated and spontaneous communications, body language, and physical movement. In person teaching and learning includes both immediate and synchronous collective work and asynchronous, out of class studies and assignments. At the same time, GenAI and edtech technologies can interrupt and block peer and interpersonal contact when used in physical spaces.

Fully online courses support independent student learning through asynchronous design and expectations. Communications between instructors and students and peers are staggered and not in “real time.” There may be more opportunities for student reflection and development of independent projects in online courses as well as flexibility of deadlines.

Hybrid courses combine live class sessions with asynchronous work (in this sense, all classes are hybrid). These courses may meet partially in person while conducting other work and interactions online or may use an online platform for live sessions and the same or additional platforms for assignments and written discussions.

Hyflex courses are live with both in person and virtual options for participating in class sessions. Instructors and students work in both spaces at the same time, occasionally crossing the in person/virtual space border and often working separately, with the instructor moving between these groups.

Student identities are an essential context for course design. When we are aware of our students’ communities and cultures, we can educate ourselves to understand communication styles and social norms that might impact our intended learning environments. When we are aware of the range of individual identities students may bring to class (which can include gender, neurodiversity, and trauma, for example), we can make decisions about our policies on civility and appropriate discourse. Consulting our institutional fact books and reports can help us predict at least some of these identity contexts.

A frequent concern we have relates to our **students' prior knowledge and skills needs**. When we are aware of the knowledge and skill levels our students bring to our courses, it is much easier to design effective assignments and plan how to achieve our learning objectives. If we've taught the course recently, we may have a good sense of this. If not, asking our colleagues and department admins may be a useful and time-saving approach.

All three of the above context areas frame the urgency of anticipating and designing for student **accommodations.** Our students are increasingly aware of their own neurodiversity, which has emerged as a central accommodation need. Our offices for student accessibility (which may be termed disability services or student accommodations, the names vary) are good starting points for finding out the needs students are likely to have and the accommodations that may be required. Also, our learning management system teams (for Brightspace, Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle, etc.) can advise on specific tools and strategies for changing deadlines and modifying content for accessibility.

Recommended Resources:
Modalities
Online Teaching
Hybrid Teaching
Hyflex Teaching

Student Identities
Universal Design for Learning
Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies

Prior Knowledge and Skills
Assessing Prior Knowledge and Skills Gaps (Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation)

Accommodations
Handbook for Reasonable Accommodations in the College Classroom (West Virginia University Center for Excellence in Disabilities)

Part Two: Learning Objectives

The theme and content of a course are to a large extent decided by curriculum committees who review and approve learning objectives, descriptions, and methods for courses as well as the course level and connection to major, minor, general education, or independent learning requirements. Within these constraints, as instructors we can select resources, design assignments and exams, set the pacing of the course, and determine how students will work towards achieving the set learning objectives.

Learning objectives are the foundation for assessment of student learning, assignments and exams, and courses taught over time and by different instructors. When students understand the meaning and purpose of their learning objectives and see these referenced in lectures, assignments, and feedback, they are likely to mirror this language and retain the purpose underneath the knowledge and skills they are encountering.

Consider adding a short section to your syllabus that explains each of your learning objectives and connects these with the relevant assignments and projects in your course. Over the term, build in opportunities for students to identify their progress towards learning objectives through short writing assignments and reflective discussions.

Recommended Resources

- Syllabus Resources
- Writing Effective Learning Objectives/Educational Objectives (Johns Hopkins University)
- Rethinking Rigor: Challenging Students & Supporting Meaningful Learning (Teaching + Learning Lab)

Part Three: Assignments and Assessment Plans

Assignments are meant to be learning experiences rather than tests of what students already know. Sometimes we may believe our assignments are tests of how well students understand and implement our instructions, and that can distract us from designing assignments that increase students' progress towards our learning objectives. Great assignments are memorable for their effective combinations of practice, appropriate levels of challenge, and meaningful connections to students' lives and careers.

Great assignments also provide opportunities for multiple types of assessment. Involving students in assessing their own work with rubrics, self-reflection, and peer review can increase student performance in the next assignments and on exams. Considering how and when to provide written and verbal feedback on assignments is a critical instructor skill we develop over time: selecting what to validate and what to improve in student work can streamline our efforts while strengthening student progress.

A quick word on course and assignment grades: decide BEFORE designing your course how you will assess and apply grades. How will your grading policy communicate student progress or concerns? Are you ready to try ungrading? Is flexibility (extra credit, late work, dropping scores, etc.) part of your plan? Set your policies and include these in your syllabus and assignment instructions rather than relying solely on separate policy sections.

Recommended Resources:

- Assignment Design
- Assessment & Evaluation
- Feedback for Learning (Columbia Center for Teaching & Learning)
- Ungrading: an FAQ (Jesse Stommel)

Next in the series: Timing & Time Management

Four: Timing & Time Management

Time and learning tend to work together in three directions: in straight lines, circles, and spirals. Linear learning is reflected in step-by-step processes while circular learning is experienced through the repetition of practice. Spiral learning combines these directions with a progression towards learning outcomes accomplished through the return of practice and the movement towards new knowledge and new practices. When we create our course schedules, we can build these in and also indicate to our students how our course timing is intended to help them achieve their learning goals.

For our own ease of design, backwards planning is a great friend to instructors. Starting with our desired outcomes and stepping back carefully to the first day of class (or even the moment students encounter our course online or via a welcome email) can help us include every necessary step and consider the amount of time needed between class sessions and assignments, between assignments and feedback, and between midterm exams and finals.

The timing of our courses is closely linked to time management on our part and our students. As more and more of our students identify as neurodiverse with executive functioning challenges, we can build in support for such skills as focusing attention, setting priorities, and improving memory. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a globally recognized pedagogy for designing learning environments that foster executive functioning.

Recommended Resources:

- Consistency and Predictability as Principles for Course Design (Penn Medical Ethics and Health Policy's Online Education)
- Backwards Design
- Supporting Executive Functioning through Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (University of Virginia Teaching Hub)

Part Five: Technology

We are in transition with technology and higher education. Until recently, technology was our choice as instructors: what we used and how much we engaged with educational and smart technologies, regardless of our institutional requirements or our students' preferences. Now, we are rapidly moving into instructional spaces where technologies pre-determine how and what we are teaching at some steps behind how and what our students are learning. In this unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and often anxiety-provoking time of educational changes, there are practical, effective actions and choices we can make.

Our course learning management system is Brightspace, aka the digital space where our students expect to find their course information and assignments. Some of us use Brightspace deeply and interactively; some of us use the platform minimally, preferring analog (physical) materials or other digital spaces. In either case, we are responsible for knowing how to use Brightspace in support of our students: our LMS team has an excellent set of guides and workshops and can respond to questions throughout your course design and implementation (see below for links).

The biggest bear in the room these days is a grizzly-polar bear hybrid that changes shape based on who and how it is used: GenAI. We wrestle with ethical issues, learning curves, and how our realities are reinterpreted and transformed through GenAI tools. Rather than forbidding ChatGPT and its siblings in our courses, we can design assignments that teach our students to train their GenAI to adapt to their learning needs. We can also set ethics policies that invite discussions of values and impact rather than setting punitive and inflexible expectations.

Much easier than integrating GenAI into our courses is deciding which technologies to include in our discussions and assignments. Annotating and mapping software, collaborative tools, design and research platforms: these can all enrich learning when aligned with content and student skill levels. A word of caution: asking students to learn and use more than one new educational technology may cause stress and take time from practice and reflection. Consider how much to assign and how much time you may need to train your students in new technologies.

Recommended Resources:

- John Jay Brightspace User Guides & Tutorials
- John Jay Brightspace Workshops & Webinars
- AI & Teaching
- AI Syllabi Policies: A look at the collection (Lance Eaton)
- AI and Positionality: A Guide for Learning Communities (Emese Ilyes)
- Tech Tools to Enhance Your Teaching (Faulkner University)

Part Six: Accommodations

In New York State, 20.7% of K-12 students were identified with special education needs in 2022 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_204.70.asp). Of these, a substantial number are entering or already in our colleges and universities. What does this mean for how we design and implement our courses?

We are more responsible than we have ever been for increasing our awareness of the multiple abilities and needs that impact our students' learning (and of our own abilities and needs and how these impact our teaching). We can take time to review the statistics and stories in the first two resources below and reflect on how we supported students and missed supporting students with accommodation needs.

Realizing that students may not disclose their disabilities or ask for accommodations, we can plan ahead to include ability-diverse, supportive frameworks and activities in our courses. Please remember that individual accommodation requests must be made through our Office for Accessibility Services and not granted solely based on a student's request.

For designing accessible courses that are likely to meet most students' needs, consider the principles of Universal Design Learning (UDL), which is internationally recognized as an effective pedagogy for accessible, successful learning environments. Universal Design for Learning emphasizes offering multiple means and options towards achieving learning outcomes.

All course designs contain gaps in meeting student needs that we find through trial and error: there will be a student or students who present us with requests and situations we have not yet encountered or thought through. Designing courses for accommodations has the built-in benefit of creating more capacities for teaching and interactions in our work and deepening our understanding of our course content and skills expertise.

Recommended Resources:

Neurodiversity Is Diversity: How educators can support students who learn differently
(Solvegi Schmulsky)
https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/articles/neurodiversity-is-diversity

Supporting Neurodiverse and Physically Disabled Students in Engaged Learning
(Caroline J. Ketcham)
https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/resources/supporting-neurodiverse-and-physically-disabled-students-in-engaged-learning/#research-informed-practices

Making Content Accessible

https://www.cuny.edu/accessibility/content/

Universal Design for Learning
https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1hs0k_ic0j8opZHkxu250qa8l6d0zklDuw90qOQV_YRY/edit?slide=id.g2e66792663e_0_0#slide=id.g2e66792663e_0_0

Part Seven: Practice

When we teach, we often follow this sequence with our students: 1) present information, 2) assign practice, and 3) test learning. We may or may not use a variety of methods we use to accomplish these steps. What we do share is a common belief that practice connects our students' encounters with knowledge and their abilities to retain and act on that knowledge.

When we are intentional about our practice design, we create opportunities to reinforce knowledge and skills, to construct our ongoing access to these, and to improve our performance based on what we have learned. Multiple studies show that we learn and retain more when we use a variety of practice strategies (see article below) over time. When we look at our course schedules, we can incorporate practice through repetition and variety (remember the spiral of timing and learning from Part Four in this series). When we increase the complexity of repetitive practice, we are scaffolding our assignments as if we were building and completing a physical structure.

Practice has another useful feature for learning: the experience of failure. When we experience failure, practice assessing our errors, and try again by adapting for our failures, we understand our learning goals better (and learn important life lessons). Try modeling failures and corrections in your courses to relieve student anxiety, and consider giving credit for student identification and explanation of mistakes as well as correct answers.

Recommended Resources:

- **Why Variation in Practice & Learning improves skills dramatically** (Aditya Shukla) https://cognitiontoday.com/why-variation-in-practice-learning-improves-skills-dramatically/#google_vignette

- **Cognition and Reasoning**
  - Cognitive Learning
  - Critical Thinking and Reflection
  - Inquiry-Based Learning

- **Hands-On, Practical Learning**
  - Experiential Learning
  - Teaching with Case Studies
  - Problem-Based/Project-Based Learning

Part Eight: Communications

Our communication opportunities and challenges with our students begin well before our first class contacts. Our syllabus is a communication tool; welcome messages on our digital course platforms and welcome emails are communication strategies. Course catalog descriptions, schedules, and the automated notifications of course enrollment are perhaps some of the earliest communications that frame our interactions in our courses.

More actively, we may have experience with student outbursts during class discussions, reluctance and resistance to participate in conversations, and seemingly irresolvable conflicts between students' opinions and values when debating course content and what they are observing and experiencing in their non-academic lives.

What can we do to encourage positive, ethical, and civil discussions that partner with our learning objectives? Transparency and consistency are two practices I recommend. By transparency, I mean defining the terms we are using with specific details and examples so that students can understand what we intend AND making sure we list every step we are asking them to take in completing work and engaging in communications. In recommending transparency, I also include creating and co-creating class policies (group agreements) for how individuals and the whole class (including ourselves) will conduct themselves ethically, civilly, and kindly.

In defining consistency, I am speaking of setting patterns that we repeat (transparently) with our students in giving instructions and feedback and in facilitating conversations. Patterns create stability, and stability is the foundation for learning. When students feel confident they know our “rules,” their anxieties about acceptance and performance decrease, and they are more likely to be less reactive and more responsive.

As a teacher across many levels and disciplines, I’ve found facilitation roles and skills to be essential to effective communication with students, and inviting students to learn and practice these has made our discussions much more open, civil, and productive. Learning to shift, reconcile, and reflect conversations intentionally, for example, helps to keep discussions focused while making sure participants feel seen and heard. See the resource below for more facilitation opportunities.

Like emerging technologies, effective, ethical, and inspiring course communications continue to grow and present unexpected opportunities and challenges. When we commit to our own possibilities to change and risk, our students are even more likely to join us!

Recommended Resources:

- Facilitative Teaching: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/w9g8fgj0patu2k28vehzj/Facilitative-Teaching.pdf?rlkey=x7brh6wc60zt71yym2qj4bfxz&st=p0jf8595&dl=0
- Mentoring: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/o55l7u122lj1l8jyc7zij/Mentoring.pdf?rlkey=5fwcslwegc0s21vy8fhmdhrxd&st=i0rp2afq&dl=0
- Classroom Management: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/skb4ad9s84pz2x5gger3i/Classroom-Management.pdf?rlkey=mafs2lrcjzqqmuzlh9kb0qc01&st=q6js0c3o&dl=0

- Civil Discourse in the Classroom (AAUP): https://www.aaup.org/academe/issues/105-0/civil-discourse-classroom
- Dialogue Resources (National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement): https://freespeechcenter.universityofcalifornia.edu/programs-and-resources/resource-materials/civil-discourse-resources/

Part Nine: Discomfort, Stress, Crisis, and Trauma

Hit the emoji button: which ones represent the most frequent reasons for student absences and for extended deadlines in your courses last year? Which emojis represent your own reasons to modify schedules or assignments? Let's get real about the world we're in now.

We live in communities, both inherited and chosen. We live in times of deep, systemic, and sudden trauma. When we come together in our courses, as instructors and students,in groups and one-to-one pairings, we come as members of our communities and in our experiences of trauma. These contexts create our individual senses of who we are and how we want to be seen.

Every other year, I've been teaching a faculty seminar on Practical Teaching for Resilient Learning. In this seminar, we discuss the differences between discomfort, stress, crisis, and trauma and how these impact our students and call for attentive responses. Think about these four categories and how you might define them and consider asking your students in the first week of classes to define these and make connections to your syllabus policies.

I want, more than in any post in this series, to encourage all of us to respect each other as whole human beings and to do that by NOT making decisions about how to resolve each other's life issues. In our courses, we teach problem-solving associated with our course content and skills (and in the best cases, with professional and real-life applications). At the same time, we are instructors and not in contracted professional mental health roles with our students.

When we respect our roles as instructors and our students' roles as learners, we are free to listen to what our students are sharing about their concerns and ask clarifying questions to make sure we understand what they are asking and sharing. This stance opens up our options for validating the discomfort, stress, crisis, and trauma (without judging how students perceive these) and making appropriate referrals to resources and advisors.

In our syllabi, be sure to include a list of referrals to campus programs as well as policies for flexibility. Our student affairs offices as well as our teaching and learning centers may have models that can be quickly adapted to suit your teaching goals.

Please take a look at the recommended resources below for guidance, examples, and opportunities.

Recommended Resources:

- **Caring vs. Care-Taking:** https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/omojwbpsejux5ykm75nh9/Caring-vs.-Caretaking-2024.pdf?rlkey=blwyqub4qxgteiywo9znebxga&st=qsbrrsof&dl=0
- **Trauma-Informed Teaching:** https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/ejmr7hhpgkbh78f9au0w4/Trauma-Informed-Teaching.pdf?rlkey=thenvoeym4l2hsuz3tl4cbvwp&st=7cdg651y&dl=0
- **Pedagogy of Kindness:** https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/j7v1k8576pzfhibkwacaa/Pedagogy-of-Kindness.pdf?rlkey=hufl6f5temvjnc931bs36cz4i&st=5zb2z699&dl=0
- **Flexible Deadlines (Open CoLab, Plymouth State University):** https://colab.plymouthcreate.net/ace/ace-practice/flexible-deadlines/

Part Ten: Exams, Projects, Papers, & Transfer of Knowledgeable Skills

Assessment. Benchmarks. Completion. Deadlines. Evaluation. Finals. For most of us, the exams and projects that require the most grading are the ones we are most reluctant to let go. How else will we know if our students have succeeded in learning?

If you've been reading and thinking with me (perhaps arguing and occasionally agreeing), you'll be prepared to hear that learning can be and is demonstrated through many, many different activities, some comprehensive and others partial and incremental. My questions for you: Is your assessment practice working for you? Is it working for your students these past 2-3 years?

We can relieve a great deal of anxiety for our students and ourselves by designing equitable, reflective, participatory assessments that provide more reliable data about our students' progress towards our learning objectives. Reflective writing before and after assignments, for example, can demonstrate changes in knowledge and problem-solving skills. Peer reviews for team member contributions and processes can add to our understanding of active participation. Grading for progress over time rather than on a single exam or presentation performance may yield stronger evidence for a student's growth and potential to transfer knowledge.

As we build our course schedules, let's return to the spiral of learning related to timing (Part Four of this series) and how we defined our learning objectives (Part Two of this series). Can we use these to revise our final and ongoing assessment plans?

Recommended Resources:

- Assessing Equitably with All Students in Mind: https://ctl.columbia.edu/resources-and-technology/resources/assessing-equitably/
- Course Assessment (Queens College): https://www.qc.cuny.edu/oie/assessment/course-assessment/
- Alternatives to Traditional Testing (UC Berkeley): https://teaching.berkeley.edu/teaching-strategies/assessing-learning/alternatives-traditional-testing
- Transfer of Knowledge to New Contexts (Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, Yale University): https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/transfer-of-knowledge-to-new-contexts

Thanks for reading! Happy course designing!

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