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Introduction to the Course Navigation Guide

This four-part guide provides tips and suggestions to create a Brightspace course site that is easy for students to access and navigate:

1. **Organizing your course content.** This section demonstrates the principles that need to be considered when designing an organized online course, as communication quality is key to online student learning. This includes content naming conventions, module hierarchies, and visibility of materials.

2. **Interacting with students.** This section shares the methodologies on constructing efficient communication platforms to provide students with ways to find the help they need. This further provides instructors with feedback to better understand the achieved quality of learning.

3. **Keeping learners on track.** This section introduces several notification tools to help students stay on track. These tools are available in Brightspace, including the announcement tool, the calendar tool, intelligent agents, etc. and describes how they can be used to send out concise reminders and announcements to students.

4. **Opening the course.** This final section recommends that instructors view their course in the learner’s perspective and provide students with online guidance before and during the first lecture. This helps students familiarize themselves with the basic operations of Brightspace and its various tools.
Organizing Content

The presentation of a course plays a vital role in its success. The following tips will help instructors effectively organize and design their course content so that it is logical, structured, and helpful for both students and for themselves.

Class Syllabus

A class syllabus, or course outline, can be thought of as a class manual. This document contains all necessary information for students regarding how their learning will be evaluated throughout the course. This should include due dates for assessments, lab/tutorial requirements if applicable, and the course’s expectations. Students should easily be able to access the syllabus at the beginning of and throughout the entire term. A good practice is to place the document under a general “Welcome” module. Consider highlighting key information such as due dates in a short text summary directly within Brightspace in the same “Welcome” module so that students have this information at a glance.

It is crucial to keep the syllabus consistent, so avoid any big changes to the specifications of the outline when possible and create clear measurable learning outcomes so students know what to expect. Moreover, always notify the students if changes are made.

Consistency and Module Hierarchies

It would be a good practice to organize content modules by weekly schedule or by topic. All relevant resources and assessments (e.g., lecture videos, discussion boards, quizzes) need to be organized under sub-modules (folders).

If organizing by course topic, consider ordering them by occurrence based on the class syllabus. This way there will be consistency throughout, and students can refer to the syllabus as a guide when needed. For students to efficiently navigate the course, select a decisive style of course organization and maintain the structure.

The same practice is applied to formatting modules and sub-modules. Keep the content order consistent to maximize functionality. For example, provide descriptions at the beginning of each module as well as a list of tasks or learning outcomes to help summarize the content for students. Likewise, if a topic has a quiz, place the quiz at the bottom of the topic’s module or where it is appropriately needed. This logical order will easily lead the students to what they need (Rottmann and Rabidoux, 2017).
Naming Conventions

Instructors should decide on a naming convention for all modules, assignments, quizzes, etc. as this will not only reduce the mental load that is required to find information but also help students keep track of their learning progress. For modules organized by course topic, instructors might use a naming system such as *Module 1: Communication Theory*, or *Topic 1: Nonverbal Communication*. Similarly, for weekly organization, a naming system like *Week 1: September 1st- 8th* might be used. Most important is to keep the naming convention informative and consistent as students may be confused if an assignment has different names on the course outline and course module. Figure 1 below represents an example of course content modules’ naming convention.

![Figure 1: A n example of course content modules organized by course topics.](image)

Instructors should also consider logical and intuitive ways to name assignments, quizzes, and discussions. For example, it is useful to include the module number in the quiz name. This way, when students go to the Quiz area to look at a list of their quizzes, they will be able to easily identify which quiz belongs to which module.
Content Visibility

A common complaint from students taking online courses is that they feel like they are missing course content. When used effectively, Brightspace is a powerful learning management system that can help ease student worries about missing information, and content visibility is an important aspect of this.

Generally, students should be able to find all course content and assessments in two places: **Content** on the navigation bar, and **Quizzes, Assignments, Discussions, Survey or Checklist** under **Course Tools**. Having course materials consistently organized both in their aforementioned dedicated section and linked to in the **Content** area will lower the risk of a student overlooking an assessment.

For example, when a discussion is created in the **Discussions** area, it needs to be linked in the **Content** area to be visible. However, when a discussion is created in the **Content** area, it will automatically be added to **Discussions**. While the latter scenario might be helpful, there is a downside: if the instructor creates a discussion and deletes it within the **Content** area, it will not automatically be deleted in the **Discussions** area. The instructor will need to go into the **Discussions** area and delete/hide unused discussions and reorder them as necessary.

It is also helpful to utilize the calendar function in Brightspace, which provides a visualization of when assessments are due. Likewise, adding deadlines to assignments and quizzes will ensure that the due dates are visible in the calendar.

Creating a Homepage

Finally, the homepage of an online course will be the “landing page” for students when they enter the course. They can use the homepage as a tool to briefly navigate the course. Despite its lower significance, the homepage should still be organized effectively. Communication and navigation are the two most important aspects of a course homepage (D2L, 2019). Too much information presented on a course’s homepage can be overwhelming and lead to students skipping over important details. UVic Brightspace provides a few different options for how the homepage is configured.

*More information on homepage configuration can be found in* [how to setup a default homepage](#)
Interacting with Students

With the move to online learning, students have had to adapt to different ways of communicating with their instructors, TAs, and other students. To ensure that the online learning experience is positive, maintain clear, timely, and effective communication.

Email and Announcements

Announce important updates such as class cancellations or extended assignment due dates through email or the **Announcements** tool. Brightspace allows instructors to email all students on the class list (found under **Classlist** on the navigation bar). Alternatively, an announcement notifies students through alerts and appears on their course homepage.

Discussions

Discussions connect students and encourage engagement. To avoid confusion, configure discussions in a way that is easy for students to understand and navigate. In Brightspace, discussions involve forums, topics, and threads. Forums and topics are created by the instructor. Threads can be started by both instructors and students. An example of a discussion board setup is shown in figure 2.

**Forums:** The largest category that *houses* specific topics. Students cannot interact within empty forums – they must contain at least one topic for students to engage with.

**Topics:** The specific discussion topic *within* the larger category (forum). This is where instructors write their discussion prompt. Students then read and respond to the prompt.

**Threads:** Individual responses that a student creates when responding to a topic. Other students and the instructor can reply directly to the posted thread or to the topic prompt.

![Course Topic Forum](image)

*Figure 2: An example of discussion board with forums and topics.*
For example: An instructor wants to create a ‘virtual lounge’ where students can ask general questions about course content. To do this, the instructor goes to **Discussions** and creates a *discussion forum* called “Virtual Lounges.” To keep conversations organized and topical, the instructor creates three separate *discussion topics* within that forum, named “Unit 1 Virtual Lounge,” “Unit 2 Virtual Lounge,” and “Unit 3 Virtual Lounge.” They then link each topic into their content modules. Students can begin asking questions through *threads*, and the instructor responds to those threads.

If creating a help forum such as in this example, link topics to content modules for easy access and encourage students to check discussion topics regularly and read previous questions and answers. You will also need to check topics regularly to answer questions.

**Office Hours**

Host drop-in Zoom meetings so students can ask questions directly. Use the same link every time by setting the meeting as recurring. Make sure meetings are consistent and posted clearly within both course content and Brightspace’s integrated Zoom tool (found under **Course Tools** on the navigation bar). Since it is a drop-in session, encourage students to stay for as long as they need to discuss course content. Instructors may expand on questions in the next lecture or by posting a summary of the question and response in a designated discussion area.

**Online Lectures**

Use the Zoom tool to schedule or import Zoom meetings for live lectures. For simplicity, direct students to this area as a consistent location of lecture meetings. To avoid further confusion, use the same link for lectures by setting the meeting as recurring. This way students can also bookmark the link for the whole semester if they choose.

More information on Zoom and instructions for setup can be found in how do I add a Zoom link to my course.

**Groups**

Set up different study groups by using the **Groups** function to encourage collaboration and communication between students. Through creating a new “category,” instructors can adjust the maximum numbers in each group based on the class size. Allow students to either self-enroll or use auto-enrolment to assign self-study groups randomly (Brightspace Help, n.d.). The **Group** feature assists with both splitting students up and, if selected, will create assignments, “locker spaces”, and “group discussions”. Lockers are small repositories for groups to share files such as presentations. Group discussions are discussion topics restricted, so only group members can see their posts (this is also possible through setting restrictions on discussion topics). Brightspace also generates an email list for each group so members can connect.

More information on **Groups** and instructions for setup can be found in create a group category.
Helping Students Stay on Track

With the transition to online classes, students might not be receiving as many in-class reminders from instructors as they are used to. The following tips will help instructors efficiently send out reminders regarding important course events and will help students stay on track throughout the semester.

Announcements

The **Announcements** tool in Brightspace is the most efficient way to post course announcements and important reminders for students. In addition to typing a regular text announcement, instructors can embed audio/video for students to play or add hyperlinks to specific pieces of course content. Announcements can also be pre-scheduled by adding a start date when creating them.

Announcements are most effective when the messages are clear and brief to avoid creating confusion for students and they work well as notifications for upcoming midterms, quizzes, or assignments. It should be noted that students might miss the announcements made on the Brightspace page. To ensure students are seeing these messages, announcements can be sent directly to the student’s email by editing the notification settings in **Announcement > More Actions**. Email announcements are a great way to keep students on track as they are likely to be frequently checking their email. It is best practice to avoid excessive communication, as this can be overwhelming for students in combination with communications they are receiving from their other courses as well.

*More information on the Announcement tool and instructions for setup can be found on the Brightspace Help page.*

Course Calendar

The **Calendar** tool is particularly useful if instructors would like to schedule course events for the students in their courses (Schepens, 2020). This is an effective tool for reminding students about upcoming assignment/quiz due dates, exam dates, and dates of other events. Generally, most students take around 4-6 classes per semester, where stressful workloads can often make it difficult for them to keep track of the important dates. To stay on track, students can view the calendar events for all their courses under one place by navigating to **Calendar** from the Brightspace homepage navigation bar.

The **Calendar** tool provides students with the ability to filter and show events for all/select courses, according to their needs. Students also have the option to subscribe to all/select course calendars and integrate them into another calendar application, such as Outlook, by opening the downloadable file or the link provided when subscribing. Thus, consistent use of the calendar can help organize course events for students, and it is easy to access on the course homepage. All course events created in the calendar must be accurate and must not contradict other information that can be found in the course.

*More information on the Calendar tool and instructions for setup can be found on the Brightspace Help page.*
Checklists

The Checklist tool allows instructors to create a checklist for students to highlight important or required assignments, readings, or other items that need to be completed within their course (D2L, 2014). This is a great organizational tool to improve students’ performance if they are dealing with a heavy workload. To help students stay on track, instructors can create a weekly checklist that accounts for tasks to be completed in a particular order. The created checklist can be added under the weekly modules in the “Contents” page of the course or it can be added as a link in an announcement or email, ideally distributed at a similar time each week so that students can regularly count on this support.

More information on the Checklist tool and instructions for setup can be found on the Brightspace Help page.

Intelligent Agents

Intelligent Agents are designed to send out automated emails when students meet or fail to meet certain conditions within a course (Algonquin College, n.d.). Course activities, login patterns, assignment or quiz submissions status, discussion participations, and a variety of other criteria can be monitored and used by the system as pre-conditions to send automated emails to recipients. This tool allows a one-step process rather than having to draft emails to individual students in a large class. Timely, focused emails can be remarkably effective in keeping students on track (City Colleges of Chicago). Consider using Intelligent Agents to:

- Remind students not to miss an assignment/quiz submission deadline
- Announce information that students need to know or read before a certain date
- Notify students regarding their performance in the course after an exam or to provide additional study materials if a student’s performance falls below a certain level

More information on the Intelligent Agent tool and instructions for setup can be found on the Brightspace Help page.

Brightspace Pulse App

The Brightspace Pulse App is a mobile application for students to help stay connected and on track with their courses in Brightspace. Instructors should encourage their students to download this application and enable notifications to be received through the app or by email. It is important to note that students can only access assignments or quizzes for submission through the Pulse App if they are added to the Content section of the course by the instructor.

More information on the Brightspace Pulse App and instructions for setup can be found on the Brightspace Help page.
Opening the Course

Now that the basics in designing a course have been covered, all that is left is to open the course up to students. Here are some final tips to go over before an instructor makes their course go live.

Review the Course

Before opening the course to students, it’s important to give the course site a final review, almost like proofreading the organization of materials and activities. To get a second pair of eyes on the course, consider enrolling a trusted colleague as a Supplemental Instructor to observe, test, and provide impartial feedback (Legault, 2014).

To see how the course looks from the student’s perspective, view the course as a learner to help ensure the course is displaying as intended. Instructors can also switch to different roles such as a “Supplemental Instructor” or “Teaching Assistant” to check the level of access of those roles. This can be done by clicking on the name in the top right corner in Brightspace and selecting the desired role to view the course as.

To get an even more realistic view of what students can see and do, a suggestion would be to use the demo student view. A demo student can be found in the Classlist of each course, and instructors can impersonate them to be able to view and navigate through the course as a student would. This includes interacting with content and discussions, taking quizzes, and receiving marks.

For more information about how to use the demo student tool, please see the Brightspace Help page.

Demonstrate for Students

Before the first class, record a demonstration of how to navigate the course site. View as a “learner” or use the demo student to do so. Display the course content’s organization and location of important elements (Legault, 2014). Upload the video to Echo360 for easy integration into the course so that students can reference it at any time. The following list contains recommended information to include while guiding students through the course site:

- Introduce the Announcement tool
- Use the Calendar tool to see an overview of the upcoming events, quiz/assignment deadlines, etc.
- Navigate through the course Content while explaining how the course content will be organized
- Show all current/future assignments and quizzes, navigate to the Assignments/Quizzes section
- Show the Discussions section including how to find discussion forums and topics; demonstrate how to post a thread within a discussion topic
- Show posted videos in Echo360 Media
- Show where students can check their Grades
- Demonstrate how to access Zoom in Brightspace and enter Zoom meetings
- Recommend that students download the Pulse App to receive notifications like course announcements and upcoming due dates on their phones if they have trouble checking their email regularly
Conclusion

Online courses, in comparison to traditional in-person classes, are convenient because they can be completed remotely, yet they tend to require more self-discipline. New ways of course content organization, teaching tools and communication styles provide instructors with ways to help students navigate their course more easily. By considering the student experience and following the methods provided in this guide, the course as a result will be better understood and navigated by students.
References


