

# Instructional FORUM

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Maryland Community Colleges

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*In This Issue: Articles Covering  
Emerging Modalities,  
Student Engagement,  
Interactive Content,  
and Leadership Practices*



PRINCE GEORGE'S  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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## Greetings from the Editor

Welcome, and thanks for reading the 2023–2024 issue of the Instructional Forum!

This year's issue marks the fourth year since expanding the Instructional Forum to include community colleges across Maryland, and I am so happy to see how successful the expansion has gone!

Although our campuses and communities vary, educational and pedagogical practices and concerns seem universal. Whether it's in Frederick, Carroll, Baltimore, or Prince George's County, we are all doing our best to serve the needs of community college students. Much like the American experience, we may differ in many ways, but we are all fundamentally seeking to achieve similar goals.

In this issue, you can find essays highlighting instructional methods regarding emerging modalities, leadership practices, and fostering positive student interaction through a variety of methods.

As pedagogy is dynamic, the articles featured herein attempt to offer perspectives and solutions to issues that are not necessarily unique to Maryland but serve to catalogue best practices of the community colleges across Maryland.

*Cliff Starkey*

### **2024–2025 Instructional Forum Call for Articles**

For the 2024–2025 issue (Volume 38), the deadline to submit articles is Tuesday, January 21.

The topic for next issue will be “Our College Communities.” Please consider writing an article on what you are doing to effect change, adapt your classes, and increase student success, retention, and completion in relation to this topic.

As always, the Instructional Forum will consider all articles about anything related to instruction at the college level. We also welcome articles from the various instructional support groups, such as the Library, the Writing and Tutoring Centers, the Honors Program, and more. We also would love articles from academic division deans, associate deans, and department chairs!

Please consider sharing your instruction-enhancing thoughts and research through the Instructional Forum because the work you do encourages and inspires your colleagues!

Submit your articles to [InstructionalForum@pgcc.edu](mailto:InstructionalForum@pgcc.edu) as attachments in Word (.docx). Articles should be from 500–2000 words. Please refer to the end of this issue for submission information and documentation format or email the editor for input.

# Does Instructional Modality Matter to Student Success?

Timothy S. Faith, Associate Professor, Community College of Baltimore County

## Introduction

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The COVID-19 pandemic introduced an enormous experiment in higher education in 2020, as colleges and universities across the nation were ordered to cease in-person instruction to mitigate the chances of the spread of the novel coronavirus among students and faculty. Many colleges elected to operate on an emergency basis to help students complete their spring courses by switching course modality to a remote synchronous method, using video conferencing tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams to deliver instruction.

In the years that followed, colleges continued to offer this modality side-by-side with traditional in-person and fully asynchronous modalities to students. This paper aims to determine whether teaching modality affects student outcomes such as earning an A, B, or C final grade (ABC), or the frequency of student withdrawal from courses at a large, mid-Atlantic community college.

The null hypotheses for this analysis are that modality does not impact the likelihood students will earn an ABC nor impacts the likelihood a student will withdraw from the course.

## Methodology

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Many researchers have studied the impact of student modality on student success. Cottrell examined course grades and withdrawal rates between face to face and online learners, and after implementing a near-neighbor match (including a total of fifteen confounding covariates), concluded that student grades are not significantly different between online and face-to-face students, but online students have higher withdrawal rates (Cottrell, 2021). Dziuban examined course outcomes for face-to-face, blended, and asynchronous online courses (including whether the student earned a “C” or better, and whether the student withdrew from the course) in relation to student’s rating of the course as “excellent” using a decision-tree method and concluded that blended learning resulted in a slightly higher success rate and slightly lower withdrawal rate compared to face-to-face and online learning (Dziuban, et al. 2018).

I began this analysis by collecting data from the Envisions Argos reporting system for each semester from fall, 2016 through fall, 2023 using the Pedagogy Grade Distribution (Excel) report. Each semester’s data was exported into a comma separated values (csv) file.

A total of 67,785 observations were in the remote synchronous modality, and 212,097 observations were in the asynchronous modality, with a balance of 463,583 observations in a face-to-face or hybrid modality.

I subsequently imported this data into a MySQL database, and defined specific variables for further analysis, including: (a) age, (b) isFemaleT<sub>1</sub>, (c) isRST<sub>1</sub>, where 1 indicated that the class was taught remote synchronously, (d) isOnlineT<sub>1</sub>, where 1 indicated that the class was taught online asynchronously. I also defined a variable, intModality, and coded remote synchronous instruction as 1, asynchronous instruction as 2, and face-to-face/hybrid instruction as 3.

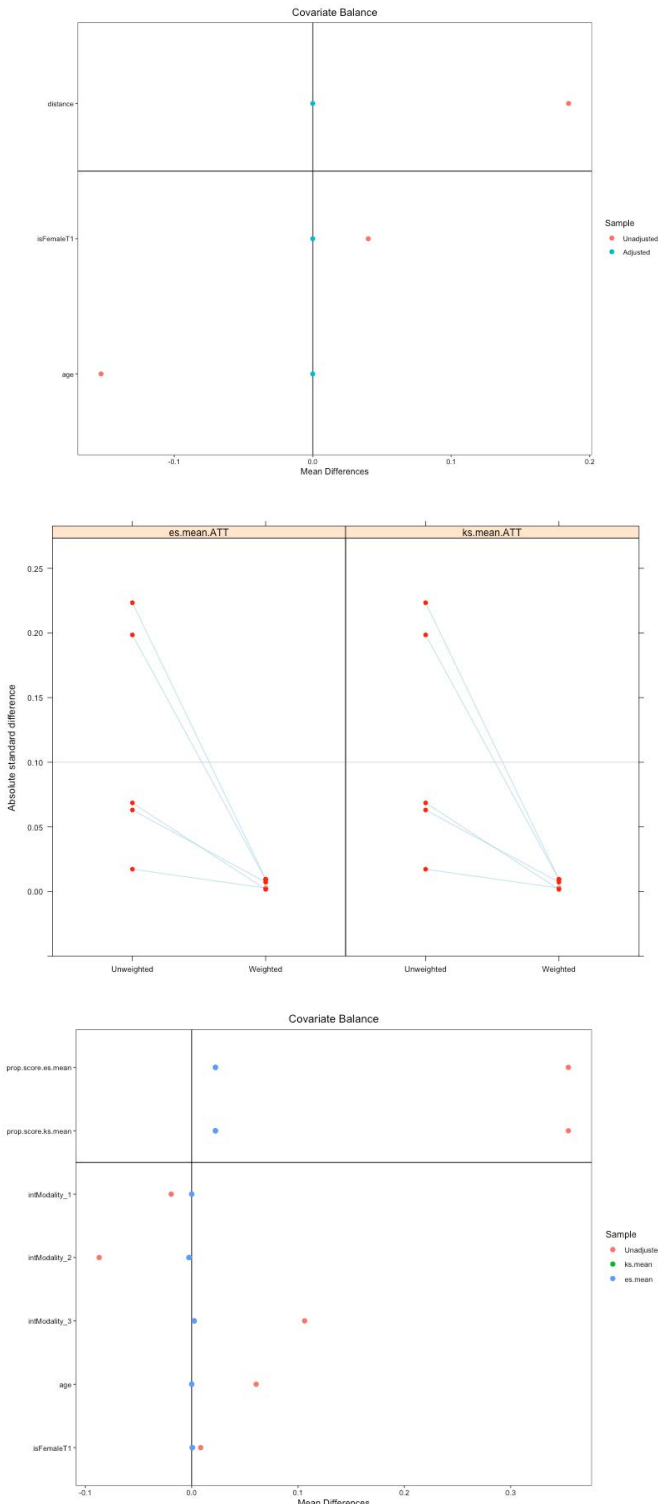
I defined two dependent variables: (a) isABCT<sub>1</sub> where 1 indicated that the student received a final grade of ABC, and 0 indicated that the student received a final grade of DFW, and (b) isWithdrawT<sub>1</sub> where 1 indicated that the student received a final grade of a W, and 0 indicated that the student received another letter grade for the course.

I excluded race from this analysis as there was a high frequency of unknown race in the dataset.

I then utilized R version 4.2.2 to conduct a statistical analysis of the data. I used the matchit library in R to define initial models to match observations based on age and gender using the “genetic” match method with nboots and population of 1,000 respectively (Diamond & Sekhon, 2013). No treatment observations were discarded using this method.

To estimate the treatment effect and its standard error, I fit a linear regression model with whether the student succeeded in the course (by earning an A, B, or C) as the outcome, and the treatment, covariates, and their interactions as predictors, and then included the full matching weights in the estimation. The “lm” function was used to fit the outcome, and the “comparisons” function in the

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“marginaleffects” library was used to perform a g-computation in the matched sample to estimate the ATT. A similar linear regression model was created to evaluate whether the student withdrew from the course and whether the student earned an ABC in the course (Griever, 2022). Matching was performed using the MatchIt package (Ho, 2011) in R, which calls functions from the Matching package (Diamond & Sekhon, 2013; Sekhon, 2011).

To help validate this result, I also used the Toolkit for Weighting and Analysis of Nonequivalent Groups (“twang”) version 2.6 library and the ps function for evaluating the modality’s impact on withdrawal rates and student success. The ps function applies the weights obtained from the model where each observation is given a weight that reflects the probability of receiving the treatment given its covariates. Based on computational limitations, I set the n.trees option for gradient boosting iterations to 700, to maximize the amount of nonlinearity and interactions that could be considered using this approach (Ridgeway, et al. 2023). I then used the glm function to perform a regression analysis of the matched data using the weights of each observation, balanced for gender and age. I then calculated the odds of the outcome comparing the reference modality (remote synchronous) to both asynchronous learning and face-to-face/hybrid learning as to the probability of a student earning an ABC or withdrawing from the course (Ridgeway et al., 2023). Figures were generated within R using the Love.plot function.

### Preference Score Match

Using an exact preference score method through the matchit module, I created a model where remote synchronous was the treatment and observations were matched on age and gender. Figure 1 is a Love plot showing the balance of the models here before and after matching, illustrating that the genetic-matched model has no variation between control and treatment groups, substantially improving balance over the initial data.

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## Does Instructional Modality Matter to Student Success?

I found that students were 4.4% less likely ( $p < 0.001$ ) to earn an ABC in remote synchronous classes compared to all non-remote synchronous courses taught during the period. However, I also found that students were 0.4% less likely ( $p < 0.003$ ) to withdraw from remote synchronous courses compared to all non-remote synchronous courses taught during the period.

I also found that students were 5.4% less likely ( $p < 0.001$ ) to earn an ABC in asynchronous classes compared to all non-asynchronous courses taught during the period. I found that students were 2% more likely ( $p < 0.001$ ) to withdraw from asynchronous courses compared to all non-asynchronous courses taught during the period.

I then used the twang module to evaluate modality as a factor, where remote synchronous was defined as the reference modality, and where the asynchronous and face-to-face/hybrid modalities were compared. I created a model where the dependent variable was whether the student received an ABC in the course, and the independent variables were modality as a factor, age, and gender. Figure 2 is a Love plot illustrating that the matched model is in better balance compared with the unmatched data. Figure 3 also compares effect sizes before matching and after, with blue lines indicating a reduction in effect sizes for all variables, and closed red circles indicating a statistically significant difference.

I then used the glm function to evaluate the effects of the three modalities on student success in courses, with remote synchronous as the reference modality. The estimated change in log odds for the asynchronous modality was  $-0.108$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that students were less likely to earn an ABC in asynchronous courses compared to remote synchronous courses. The estimated log odds for the face-to-face/hybrid modality was  $0.379$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that students were more likely to earn an ABC in face-to-face/hybrid courses compared to remote synchronous courses. By exponentiating these two log odds, I found that students had an 89% odds of achieving an ABC in asynchronous courses compared to remote synchronous, but a 146% chance of achieving an ABC in face-to-face/hybrid courses compared to remote synchronous.

I then used the glm function to evaluate the effects of the

three modalities on student withdrawal rates. The estimated change in log odds for the asynchronous modality was  $0.260$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that students were more likely to withdraw from asynchronous courses compared to remote synchronous courses. The estimated log odds for face-to-face/hybrid modality was  $-0.04$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that students were slightly less likely to withdraw from face-to-face/hybrid courses compared to remote synchronous courses. By exponentiating these two log odds, I found that asynchronous students had 129% odds of withdrawing from asynchronous courses compared to remote synchronous courses, where face-to-face/hybrid students had 96% odds of withdrawing compared with remote synchronous courses.

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## Analysis

Based on the above match objects, the null hypotheses were both false for both Remote Synchronous and Asynchronous courses. Both modalities tend to result in fewer students earning an ABC as a final grade, though asynchronous courses have a 5.4% performance gap with the average ABC rate of the College, compared with 4.4% for remote synchronous courses.

Both modalities also have different withdrawal rates for courses. I found that remote synchronous courses tend to slightly reduce the overall withdrawal rate, where asynchronous courses have a substantial increase, 2%, in the withdrawal rate compared to the overall averages during the period.

These results correlate with the twang PSM models in that success rates in remote synchronous courses are significantly higher than asynchronous course, but significantly lower than in-person/hybrid courses. In addition, withdrawal rates between remote synchronous and face-to-face courses are comparable but are significantly lower compared to asynchronous courses.

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## Conclusions & Further Research

The data suggests that there is a variation in student outcomes based on the offered teaching modality across a relatively long period of study and across numerous disciplines and courses offered during that period.

## Does Instructional Modality Matter to Student Success?

However, remote synchronous shows promise in increasing student success compared to a purely asynchronous course, and also in reducing the withdrawal rate of students from courses compared to all other modalities.

The research here indicates that further follow-up will improve the preliminary analysis presented here. For example, there are numerous other covariates (such as student race and college grade point average) which may explain variations in student course outcomes. Collecting these independent variables and using them in the preference score match will improve the accuracy of the matches and the reliability of this analysis.

In addition, the relative experience of faculty teaching in a remote synchronous modality, along with the expectation of both faculty and students as to the likelihood of success while enrolled in such a modality, may also impact student performance and the likelihood of withdrawal from course taught this way. While the data presented show an average across a wide variety of programs, courses, and levels, the models do not necessarily generalize to particular programs with special student populations.

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# Hay in a Needlestack: Evaluating Content for Online Teaching in the New Internet Age

Mary Rose Bedell, Adjunct Instructor, Art Appreciation and Art History, Community College of Baltimore County

Effective teaching requires both the delivery of content and the assessment of student competency. One of the strengths of the online learning environment is the ease with which instructors can integrate premade materials into their teaching practices. These materials can include videos, graphics, and articles that can be linked or embedded into an LMS or other delivery mechanism. The current educational landscape has witnessed the rise of many online studios that produce engaging educational content, much of it supported by scholarly research, high production budgets, and skilled videographers and editors.

One of the challenges modern educators face is the necessity of sorting through “junk content” online to find effective educational resources. Online educational content has grown enormously in popularity in recent years, with some social media companies promoting the educational capacities of their platforms. For example, video-based social media app TikTok has rapidly grown a “EduTok” initiative, where creators are encouraged to create educational content (Rach & Lounis, 2020.) In fact, because there is so much content out there, it may be one of the mandates of the modern teacher to sort through the noise and find the best content. Students with social media access have access to virtually infinite educational resources online, some of it good, some of it bad. At least within our classrooms, as educators it is our responsibility to evaluate the online sources we are integrating into our courses to ensure their suitability to the educational environment.

Junk content can take on many different forms. Many seemingly educational materials online contain inaccurate information, commercialization, propaganda, and AI-generated content that we need to sift through to find what we need as educators. As an online educator in Art History and Art Appreciation, I have found no shortage of people online willing to state their inaccurate opinions as fact and upload them for millions to see. To that end, I have compiled some pointers for sifting through the junk and locating strong materials for online teaching:

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## Screen All Content

The primary responsibility of the instructor when identifying appropriate content is thoroughly screening the entire media piece. For videos, this means watching the entire video, while for interactive media like plug-ins and educational games, this may mean spending a while exploring different branching paths. Unless explicitly framed otherwise, students likely interpret the sources provided by an instructor as being endorsed by that instructor. By thoroughly screening the content, instructors can be certain that the sources are suitable for the educational environment or make note of any areas that they may wish to disclaim or explain to students.

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## Find Trusted Creators

There is effective educational content on many different platforms, from YouTube to TikTok, but this does not mean that all educational content is created equal. Individual content creators can vary dramatically in quantity, whereas you are more likely to find consistently strong educational content from institutions. For example, podcasts made by a museum are typically held to similar standards as other educational materials made by that museum since they are a reflection of that museum’s institutional identity. Therefore, they are often more trustworthy than a similar podcast made by an independent creator (though results may vary). Likewise, educational companies and nonprofits like TED-Ed and Khan Academy often consult experts and cite sources that make their content more trustworthy, if not unassailable. This is not to say that independent content creators out there can’t make great content, and they might even offer a perspective that an institution cannot, but it will be more work to sift through.

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## Filter Content Farms

Content mills are online businesses whose model is to generate as much content as possible to garner engagement and “go viral” (Mears 2023). This allows the content mills to sell advertisements, so the more attention-grabbing the content, the more profitable it becomes. This content may



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occasionally be educational in content mills tend to be well-optimized for search engines, so their content clutters the top of Google searches.

When identifying a content mill, check the website. How much content are they putting out daily? If it is a massive quantity, ask yourself how likely it is that all of this content is held to a high educational standard. What is their specialty, or mission statement? If there is not one, then it is possible that their motivation is garnering engagement. Who is the author? If you don't know, perhaps it is an indicator that they are not to be trusted.

### Ignore Clickbait

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Clickbait headlines are headlines designed to get a reader's attention, often through "exaggeration, sensationalization, scare-mongering, and otherwise producing misleading and low quality news" (Chen, Conroy, Rubin, 2015). You can recognize clickbait by looking for eye-catching, tantalizing, and formulaic phrases such as, "Five simple tricks to...", "MUST WATCH:...", or "You'll never believe what happened when I..." These headlines are typically used by content mills and creators whose ideas cannot stand on their own and are therefore largely unsuitable for the educational environment.

### Check Credentials

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Look for the creator of the content and check their credentials. If you would not invite them to come speak to your classroom in person, you won't want to include their content in your online course. Look on the web page or video description to determine who made the content, and look them up. Consider using online sources like LinkedIn to ascertain who produced the content and if they are qualified to teach your students.

### Identify Commercial Content

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In online videos and articles, it is common (and perfectly fine) for a creator to run advertisements and fundraise to support their endeavors. After all, we all deserve to make a living by making good and useful educational content. It

only becomes a problem when the advertisement seems to violate the integrity of the educational content. As an example, we should be cautious if a video about utilizing different types of microscopes ends with an advertisement for one of those microscopes, as the rest of the video was likely written with the advertisement in mind.

### Identify Propaganda

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Even worse than commercial content is propagandistic content, which I have found is all too common in videos about the humanities. The participatory web, also known as social media, has proved to be fertile ground for the production and dissemination of right-wing propaganda. This content sometimes crosses over into the educational sphere, such as when right-wing content creators generate pseudo-educational content to uphold their white nationalist revisionist histories of ancient Greece and Rome (Blazevic 2021). The content that we integrate into our courses reflects on us as instructors, and we should be very careful to find content that is free from unwanted propagandistic messages.

### Beware of AI-Generated Content

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Content generated through artificial intelligence is not always wrong or incorrect, and can even be helpful in your teaching practice, but you should know when you are referencing AI-generated content. "AI detection" tools are not foolproof, and the technology is evolving every day, so there are no hard and fast rules yet in place. When screening articles, look for things like stilted language, vagueness, and excessive signposting. In videos, listen for stilted voices and be wary of any content in which the speaker or narrator is not identified.

### Look for Accessibility

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All educational materials should be following Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards, or with alternatives provided, to allow all students equitable access to the course content. The bare minimum for accessibility in

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## Hay in a Needlestack: Evaluating Content for Online Teaching in the New Internet Age

video content is closed captioning or a transcript. This is helpful not just for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, but also for students for whom English is their second language. If a video is otherwise excellent but does not offer captions, consider taking a few moments to type up a transcript for your students. You may also wish to screen content for things like flashing lights, which may be a concern for epileptic students.

### Embrace Diverse Perspectives

One of the benefits of finding online content to include in a course is the opportunity to highlight perspectives and voices that would otherwise not be in your classroom. For example, if I look at all the videos I have curated for a course and all of the presenters share my identity as a white woman, I am not making the most of the diversity of perspectives out there. The point is not to tokenize or fill quotas, but to offer students a chance to see themselves reflected in the course and to think critically about how identity can impact the way we think about our topic.

### Don't Get Lost in the Noise

One of the dangers of utilizing online content is that the instructor risks being overshadowed by the content they have created. To counterbalance this, a certain amount of multimedia content in your course should still be made by you. My rule of thumb for myself is that students should see my face or hear my voice at least twice a week, but they don't have to be the same kind of content every time. Your content can be an overview of the week, a content lesson, a tutorial for an assignment, or "bonus content" like a thought exercise. It may also be helpful to design your content to give context to or to integrate the external content that you are using in the course. For example, I created a video that explains the fact that modernism gave rise to many different art movements all offering different responses to "What is art for, now?" in the twentieth century. Then, the curated content that followed in the week explained individual art movements, like Dadaism or Surrealism. In this way, my content acts as a bridge between the external content that I am utilizing so that the lesson seems more cohesive overall.

In this guide, I have attempted to outline some best practices for curating content to be used in teaching online in a variety of disciplines. It is not intended to be all-inclusive, and there are some instances when junk content can even be beneficial, such as using a video as an example of propaganda for students. Our main takeaway from this exercise should be that the instructors are the experts in what is useful to our students, and we must rely on strategic judgment when curating materials for our online sources.

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# More than Teaching? Modern-Day Online Student Expectations of Instructors

Sharon Brunner, Ed.D., Chair, Social Sciences, Carroll Community College

## Introduction

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Examining the online faculty-student relationship provides insight into modern-day students' perceptions of asynchronous learning in higher education (Fabrizz et al., 2021).

Asynchronous teaching may require extra effort to provide online students with opportunities to connect with their instructors. Engagement efforts and continuous technical support promote quality teaching and learning in online environments. According to Dong et al.'s (2024) systematic review of research focused on online learning variables among college students, it was recommended that online instructors have a reasonable number of assignments that allow timely, supportive feedback and stimulate interactive learning that promotes peer-to-peer communication. Li (2023) found that students felt their online courses needed more instructor-student and student-student interactions, better access to materials, and easy technology navigation. Additionally, multimedia materials, interactive tutorials, and online libraries were recommended to enrich student learning and course satisfaction.

This examination of faculty-student relationships is focused on the Social Sciences Division at Carroll Community College, which offered 32 online courses, including multiple sections for general psychology, introductory sociology, and medical terminology. A report of aggregated social sciences course evaluation data from the fall 2023 was used for this analysis to examine student feedback regarding asynchronous online courses and faculty. Approximately 41% of enrolled students (247 out of 599) completed a fall semester course evaluation. While end-of-semester evaluations are a limited measure of course and instructor effectiveness, they offer insight into the highly satisfied and unsatisfied student perspectives. The course-related and faculty-related statements and open-ended student comments comprised the course evaluation report data.

## Course-Related Feedback

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The course-related statement data revealed the summed percentage of students who strongly agreed and agreed as follows:

- 91.29% agreed that the required course materials (textbooks, technology, and other resources) supported their learning.
- 86.9% agreed that the course syllabi accurately reflected the course content and procedures.
- 83.41% agreed that the online course content and activities (video lectures, narrated PowerPoints, discussions, and projects) contributed to their learning.

A review of the open-ended course-related comments indicated that most students found the social science online courses 1) easy to navigate, 2) had relevant discussion assignments, and 3) used appropriate instructional materials. The compiled ratings and comments confirmed that most students who completed the end-of-semester course evaluation were satisfied with the structure of their asynchronous social science courses.

## Faculty-Related Feedback

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The faculty-related statements and summed percentages for “strongly agree” and “agree” ratings concerning their instructors are presented in Table 1 (Page 12).

Overall, the faculty-related feedback was positive with room for improvement. The highest **neutral** response rates occurred for availability during virtual office hours (22.92%), offering office hours (19.92%), and providing course content in a variety of ways (14.81%). Online students may not use office hours due to scheduling conflicts and instead, contact their instructor through email or the Canvas Inbox feature. While “presented course content in various ways” received the lowest student agreement percentage, there were no specific student comments about this topic. Students noted that they appreciated videos, readings, and support materials. This lower agreement rating (74.07%) for “presented course content in various ways” may have been more related to instructor presence, as discussed in the next section.

The open-ended faculty-related comments provided

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## More than Teaching? Modern-Day Online Student Expectations of Instructors

Faculty-Related Statements	Summed Percentage of Students Who Strongly Agreed/Agreed
Treated them with respect	87.56%
Provided a well-organized course	86.83%
Supported their progress	85.83%
Clearly communicated course expectations and requirements	84.36%
Provided personally relevant examples and readings	84.3%
Responded to questions and communications within the stated timeframe	84.3%
Provided feedback within the stated timeframe	82.72%
Helped them understand the usefulness of the subject	82.72%
Demonstrated in-depth knowledge of the subject	82.57%
Encouraged student questions	82.57%
Explained concepts clearly	80.5%
Provided constructive feedback on assignments	80.24%
Were actively present in their online courses	79.84%
Offered virtual office hours	76.76%
Was available during virtual office hours	74.16%
Presented the course content in various ways	74.07%

Table 1. Faculty-Related Statements and Summed Percentage for Strongly Agreed/Agreed

further insight into students' perceptions of their online experiences with the faculty. Four themes derived from common code word frequency rates were assessment, compassion, presence, and facilitation.

**Assessment:** Students value being assessed by faculty and knowing how they perform.

There were 32 comments related to grades, grading, and receiving feedback. Many comments indicated gratitude for timely feedback, while some students desired more frequent and clearer feedback for improvement.

**Compassion:** Students expect faculty members to demonstrate compassion.

There were 27 instances where students used the words care, caring, kind, supportive, encourage/encouraging, and motivating to describe their instructors. There were

minimal comments by students who perceived their instructors as uncaring or rude.

**Presence:** Students expressed wanting their instructors to be present in asynchronous courses.

There were 20 occurrences of the words active, answered, communicated, engaged/engaging, email, respond/responsive. Some students felt their instructors demonstrated online presence through narrated lectures, personal videos, announcements, discussion participation, and quick replies. Some students shared that their instructors seemed absent, with minimal teaching, so they relied heavily on the textbook for learning the content.

**Facilitation:** Students want help from their instructors.

Twenty comments focused on receiving help on assignments. Most of these comments indicated appreciation for

## More than Teaching? Modern-Day Online Student Expectations of Instructors

the help they received, while other students shared that they wished their instructors had been more helpful with course content and assignments.

### Discussion

This course evaluation data examination provides valuable information about social science courses and students' needs and wants in online courses. According to Kedia and Mishra (2023), who discovered that instructor-student interactions impact students' online learning, today's students require more than content delivery and instruction. Online social science students reported that their instructors provided feedback within the stated time frame and that it was constructive. They felt their instructors encouraged and responded to questions and communications within the stated time frame. Feedback to students is essential (Darby & Lang, 2019) and can be presented in various formats—such as text, audio, or video—to develop online instructor-student connections (Jensen et al., 2021).

Social science online students also expect compassionate instructors. While approximately 88% of students who completed a fall 2023 course evaluation indicated their instructors treated them respectfully, compassion may be a separate student perception (Strachan, 2020). According to Samuel (2017), as cited in Strachan (2020), respect is evident by allowing students “to be heard and their experiences to be valued” (p. 54). Compassion in education is represented by “caring actions toward students” (Strachan, 2020, p. 54) or addressing and lessening students' concerns. Students in the open-ended comments shared that they appreciated their instructor's care, kindness, understanding, support, and encouragement. However, respect did not appear as a common word in these comments.

Instructor presence for online social science students is an area for improvement since it had one of the lowest agreement percentages. Seeing and hearing instructors may be more critical than faculty members realize for students in their online courses. Many instructors post recorded and narrated lectures, but not all. Best practice research suggests that instructors post a welcome video (Lupkinski & Kaufman, 2023) and provide assignment feedback via video or audio technology (Espasa et al., 2019). Park and Kim

(2020) found that using an interactive communication tool like Microsoft Teams in online courses fosters strong instructor-student connections and promotes students' perceptions of instructor presence. Would requiring a student to meet with their online social science instructor via Teams at least once during a semester be well-received by students and instructors? This question will be discussed among social science online faculty members in the near future.

Lastly, according to the many instructor-related statements on the course evaluation, social science instructors are helpful. Comments mentioned faculty supporting student progress, providing relevant examples and readings, and responding to questions and communications. Each of these areas had high agreement percentages. Social science instructors will be encouraged to continue their helpfulness and to offer help to students who may be reluctant to ask. Identifying these students may be challenging, but with increased instructor presence, some students may be more comfortable asking for help.

### Final Thoughts

Raposa et al. (2021) stated that smaller colleges are more conducive to building faculty-student relationships due to low class sizes and more emphasis on teaching. However, the increasing asynchronous online course sizes may hinder faculty-student connections that meet the needs of the modern-day online student. Carroll Community College generally caps online courses at 25 students; however, accommodating waiting lists for popular online sections tends to push the cap to 27 or 28 students. The end-of-semester course evaluation data presented in this article included all asynchronous social sciences courses in fall 2023. These courses may have had as few as eight students and as many as 28. While Taft et al. (2019) explained that there is no one-size-fits-all recommendation for online course enrollment, they recommend limiting the capacity to 15 students for courses requiring higher-order thinking, complex knowledge mastery, and student skill development. Larger class sizes, up to 30 students, may be more appropriate for foundational learning (Taft et al., 2019). Social science courses at Carroll Community College

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## More than Teaching? Modern-Day Online Student Expectations of Instructors

provide foundational freshman and sophomore-level courses across many disciplines. Therefore, the online class size was optimal; students did not mention class size in the course evaluation comments.

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# A User-Friendly Way to Produce Professional-Looking, Interactive Online Content: Using CourseArc to Build Modules in Canvas

Antoinette Doherty, M.F.A., Professor, Humanities Department, Prince George's Community College

For as long as learning management systems like Blackboard and Canvas have been a required element to delivering courses to students, I have looked for a way to create interesting, interactive content for my online course sites with the goal of increasing student engagement and learning. My technological knowledge, however, is limited. Taking every opportunity to learn about ways to make interesting and engaging Canvas sites, I attended a webinar in spring 2023, hosted by eLearning at Prince George's Community College (PGCC), to learn about a content-authoring software called CourseArc. Content-authoring software allows the user to create digital courses and publish them in select formats, like Canvas, without needing to know computer coding. After completing the webinar and seeing what the software could produce, I was excited to integrate CourseArc into my Canvas courses.

## Learning the Software and Getting Started

Taking existing course modules and rebuilding them in CourseArc requires an initial investment of time to learn how to use the software. However, CourseArc was comparatively easy and worth the effort. Several factors contributed to my learning curve. A Google document created by the CourseArc representatives for the webinar attendees included helpful resources to get people started with the software. In addition to the Google document resources, Nadine Edwards, director of eLearning Services at PGCC, and Iris Antoons, professor of English at PGCC and user of CourseArc, were enormously helpful when I thought I had run into an issue when implementing the software. In the end, my issue was only a perceived one caused by the limitations of the 'Student View' feature in Canvas. My CourseArc modules worked as intended without any issues.

While building content with CourseArc in Canvas, I noticed how it seamlessly integrated into the learning management system. While the result looks like a Canvas web design, CourseArc is, in fact, a Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) link placed in Canvas that allows the faculty member to chunk and group content in a more streamlined way. This results in visually appealing modules, making it easier for students to follow and engage with the

The top screenshot displays the 'Students Progress & Performance' page for 'Module Three: Presenting a Speech (and Informative Speaking)'. It features a navigation menu on the left and a main content area with an 'Overview' section. A table lists activities with their estimated times and points:

Page/Activity	Estimated Time	Points
Introduction	2 minutes	-
Overview	7 minutes	-
Watch and Learn	45 minutes	-
Module Readings: Textbook	45 minutes	-
Practice Activity 1	12 minutes	-
Activity Quiz	-	-
Practice Activity 2	10 minutes	-
Activity: Interactive Matching	-	-
What's Next?	2 minutes	-
<b>Total Estimated Time</b>	<b>118 minutes or 1 hour and 58 minutes</b>	<b>Total: 0</b>

The bottom screenshot shows the 'Students Progress & Performance' page for 'Module Two: What is Communication? (and Preparing a Speech)'. It includes an 'Introduction' section with a 'START' graphic and a list of 'Course Learning Outcomes' numbered 1 through 9.

Figure 1. Completed Modules Using CourseArc

material. Additionally, because CourseArc does not reside in Canvas, changes to content in CourseArc automatically update in every course where it is used. Because of this, edits to content only need to be made once instead of in each Canvas course site. Furthermore, the user-friendly interface includes a drag-and-drop editor and numerous boilerplate templates, simplifying the module creation process. These features make it accessible to faculty with different levels of technical expertise.

## Module Layout and Enhancements with CourseArc

The structure of the modules I built consisted of an introduction screen, an overview screen (breaking down the

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time required to accomplish each part of the module), a 'Watch and Learn' screen (where module videos were placed), a 'Module Readings' page, pages with practice activities, and finally a 'What's Next' page that briefly summarized what was learned in the module while previewing what is in the next module.

Using CourseArc to build this content allowed me to format and layout the text in a more sophisticated way with pictures and other design elements to help keep the attention of students. The overview screen, with all the assignments and the amount of time it will take to complete them, is automatically generated by CourseArc and is easy to edit. Students really liked this feature because it would help them plan how to budget their time. The 'Watch and Learn' page included video transcripts for each video. The tools and features in CourseArc create content that complies with accessibility standards, ensuring that all students can access the material. This is a huge advantage when striving to create an equitable learning environment for all students.

I decided that the 'Module Readings' page was a perfect place to link students to the assigned readings in the course's OER, eliminating the need for students to search for them on their own. The ability to make a wide variety of activities for the activity pages, such as interactive matching, interactive graphs, interactive categorization, image labeling, interactive quizzes, and flashcards, to name just a few, allowed me to create exercises and activities in a virtual space that are truly interactive. This is exactly what I needed in content-authoring software to take my online content to a higher level.

## Launching My CourseArc Modules in a Published Canvas Course

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Once I finished building my CourseArc modules, I was excited to see how my students in fall 2023 would respond to the enhanced Canvas site. I also was eager to use CourseArc's analytics feature, which would allow me to keep track of what concepts students were not understanding, as well as the ability to look at each student's engagement with the software. This feature has great potential for increasing student retention and success because it creates an even more personalized student learning experience.

As the semester progressed, I received many positive comments about the interactive components and polished look of the CourseArc modules. Students really appreciated having everything they needed in one place, as well as the interactive exercises. Continuing to expand my understanding of all that the software can do, and incorporating even more interactive features into my Canvas modules, seems like a productive direction to take when trying to increase student success in my classes. CourseArc supports professors and students in the process of teaching and learning by empowering professors to be creative in a technological platform and engaging students in deeper learning with interactive content. I feel successful with this exploration of technology. My knowledge of all things technical is not so limited after all.

## Integrating Home Laboratory Extra Credit Projects to Reduce Student Anxiety and Increase Retention

Jennifer Wilcox, Professor, Chemistry, Harford Community College

One of the greatest challenges as a chemistry instructor is to make the subject inviting and approachable. My goal is to present a demanding curriculum while adding enjoyment to facilitate motivation. The majority of students arrive in class with a sense of dread and trepidation as they are “forced” to take chemistry as part of their major. Regardless of the level of the course, I start each semester with topics that are less rigorous to build student confidence. However, once the computational word problems begin, student confidence declines and a cloud of anxiety hovers over the classroom. While some students are comfortable openly verbalizing their anxiety, many students become quiet and withdrawn from classroom discussion and problem solving. I wanted to find a way to reduce student anxiety, increase retention, and build student confidence throughout the semester.

### Mental Health, Student Retention, and the Extra Credit Controversy

According to a study by Burch, Batchelor, Burch, Gibson, & Kimball, (2018), students do not believe that anxiety should be removed from the classroom, but be provided with approaches to manage anxiety-inducing situations. Another study showed that approximately 87% of college students cited education (i.e., academic course load, time management, financial concerns) as their primary source of stress (American Psychological Association, 2020). In 2019, a study by the American Council on Education examined the correlation between mental health and student retention finding that students with poor mental health (i.e., stress, anxiety, depression) are more likely to take longer to earn a degree or drop out entirely.

One approach to reduce student anxiety is to offer extra credit. Among educators, extra credit assignments is a controversial topic. Educators that oppose extra credit are concerned with adding additional assignments as students are struggling completing required coursework. More substantive reasons for not offering extra credit include not wanting to inflate grades, discouraging students from doing their best by providing extra points, and the creation of assignments that do not enhance student learning while

increasing the burden of grading for the instructor (Dunn and Halonen, 2019). Educators in support of extra credit believe the assignments can serve as a platform for students to apply course material, optimizing their strengths, creativity, and encourage students to take ownership of their learning. Students favor the use of extra credit (Bate, 1976, Maurer, 2006, Sheaffer, 2011), especially when it is content-related (Groves, 2000).

### Home Laboratory Extra Credit Projects

When I first began teaching, I provided students with extra credit opportunities for the last half of the semester. Assignments consisted of a research paper or a presentation on an element or a scientist related to the field of chemistry. While there were some benefits to these assignments, students were generally uninspired. The goal of these extra credit assignments was to reduce student stress and anxiety related to their course grade. However, I found that these assignments added to student anxiety because students had limited opportunity to increase course performance and the assignments were cumbersome. As I became educated on active learning, I changed my approach on extra credit assignments to a few home laboratory projects in the last half of the semester. Student feedback on the types of projects was overwhelmingly positive. While the students wanted the points, the students also enjoyed participating in the projects.

With the goals of anxiety reduction, student engagement, and retention in mind, I decided to integrate at home laboratory extra credit projects within each course unit starting at the beginning of the semester. This approach averaged to an extra credit laboratory project every two to three weeks. Extra credit assignment guidelines, including the maximum range of points that could be earned, were stated in the course syllabus. While the points for each project varied, the total extra credit points were in scale within the total course points.

The criteria for the home laboratory projects were that cost could not be a barrier and supplies must be household

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## Integrating Home Laboratory Extra Credit Projects to Reduce Student Anxiety and Increase Retention

ingredients purchased from local stores. Students had to submit a video or photographs of themselves completing the laboratory project and submit written responses to assigned questions. Students were allowed to work with classmates as long as they provided individual submissions.

Sample home laboratory projects for first semester general chemistry included:

- Creating a five-layer density column.
- Making Obbleck by Dr. Seuss® (a gooey substance with liquid and solid properties).
- Baking brownies using mole conversions.
- Constructing a spectrophotometer to observe light.
- Making fruit and herb soap to understand polarity.
- Creating Alka-Seltzer® rockets to understand chemical reactions and gas behavior.
- Making rock candy to understand supersaturated solutions and crystallization.

Sample home laboratory projects for second semester general chemistry included:

- Creating elephant's toothpaste to observe heat release from a chemical reaction.
- Growing a large alum crystal.
- Using red cabbage as a pH indicator for household products.
- Designing a T-shirt using tea tannins for oxidation-reduction chemistry.
- Building a lemon battery to understand galvanic cells.
- Extracting DNA from a strawberry.

## Results

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A majority of students participated in at least 75% of extra credit opportunities. Student engagement with the extra credit projects was consistent and encouraging. Students added creativity to their submissions by adding music, special effects, and humorous captions to their videos. Students commented how they liked having multiple opportunities to improve their grade throughout the semester with flexibility in managing assignment deadlines. Additionally, students expressed how integrating extra credit throughout the semester relieved their anxiety over quizzes and tests. Of most significance, students commented that the projects allowed them to better understand the relevance of the course material.

In the classroom, students were more interactive in course discussions as well as with each other. I used the discussion of the projects as ice breakers to introduce new material. Overall, anxiety in the classroom decreased because students knew they had opportunities to improve their course grade when the material seemed overwhelming.

Students also adjusted their techniques and procedures for their projects when an experiment didn't work as expected (i.e., growing crystals).

In terms of retention, since implementing integrated extra credit, an increased number of students attended class through the final exam. Students did not feel as defeated when the subject matter became difficult. The continued goal is to increase student engagement by offering choices of extra credit projects that appeal to different Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) majors. For example, in the course unit on energy, students will have the option to complete the elephant's toothpaste chemical reaction that demonstrates heat energy or build a simple motor that demonstrates electrical and mechanical energy.

Integrating Home Laboratory Extra Credit Projects to Reduce Student Anxiety and Increase Retention

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## Understanding the Differing Goals of Community College Students

Mark Hubley, Professor, Department of Natural Sciences, Prince George's Community College

For more than twenty years, I have been a member of the faculty at Prince George's Community College (PGCC), where I teach courses in human anatomy and physiology (A&P) and biochemistry. I love working at a community college, where my focus is teaching, rather than leading a research program and writing grant proposals. While students at PGCC have varied reasons for enrolling, the majority are here to improve their lives and achieve something they would not be able to accomplish without the community college. I feel strongly that I do my part to support the college's mission of transforming the lives of our students. In some cases, that transformation follows the path the student chose from the beginning. In other cases, the transformation involves an unexpected change in plans. Successful educational experiences come in many different shapes and sizes. Therefore, it is with considerable concern that I view the increasing emphasis placed on student completion rates as the primary measure of success.

At first glance, completion rates at community colleges nationwide do appear low. According to Community College Review, the four-year graduation rates nationwide and in the state of Maryland are around 27%. Viewed without context, it might seem disturbing that only one-fourth of students entering degree programs at "two-year" colleges graduate within four years. Community colleges should provide extensive support networks to help students obtain their associate degrees and other credentials. But for many of our students, completion of an associate degree is not the goal. We should recognize that a successful educational experience need not culminate in a degree.

The nature of the community college, with open enrollment and low cost, makes it the perfect place (and, for many of our students, the only place) for someone to embark on a post-secondary education, even if they are not sure it will be right for them. Most students in my A&P classes think they want to become nurses or other health-care providers. Maybe they have heard from friends or family that nursing is a great field with lots of opportunities and good pay. For a twenty-something-year-old raising a child and working in a dull job with little chance of

advancement, nursing might sound like a great idea. But if the only option is to enroll in a nursing program at a university that charges ten- or twenty-thousand dollars per year in tuition and fees, then it may seem too daunting to even begin. Because the community college offers classes for a fraction of that cost, it is worth a try. If it does not work out, that is okay—the student is not left with tens of thousands of dollars in debt. In our A&P classes, we see a lot of students who come to realize that a career in health care is not for them.

In the fall 2002 semester—my first year at PGCC—I had a student in one of my A&P classes named Lanette (not her real name). I remember her being smart and inquisitive, and she earned a grade of "B." In August 2022, on my twentieth anniversary at PGCC, I Googled Lanette and a few other students from that first semester. I learned that Lanette is an attorney with her own practice. I also learned that after two years at PGCC, with an impressive grade point average, she dropped out without completing her associate degree. Many college administrators and politicians would, therefore, say Lanette is not a success. I strongly disagree. I do not know why Lanette dropped out of her program at PGCC, but the likely answer is she concluded that a career in health care was not for her. The college fulfilled its mission of providing Lanette with an educational experience in which she learned something about herself. That is a success!

My son, Nick, gave me permission to write about his community college experience. After graduation from high school, Nick did not know what he wanted to do for a career. After taking a year off, he enrolled at Anne Arundel Community College (AACC) in their engineering program. Had Nick told me that he wanted to go to MIT or even the University of Maryland, I would have said, "No." I was not going to write a check that big when I was unsure of his level of commitment. However, I did not mind writing a check in the amount of \$1,800 for his first semester at AACC. Nick did very well in the program, and in May 2020, he completed his Associate of Engineering degree program after three years with \$11,000 in tuition and fees. However, he did not continue his education in engineering,

## Understanding the Differing Goals of Community College Students

and today he is on a different career path. Those same college administrators and politicians that would say Lanette is not a success would say that Nick is a success. I also consider Nick's experience at AACC a success, but I might not be so positive about the situation if we had paid \$60,000 for a degree he is not using.

What is the difference between Lanette and Nick? Both went to community colleges with the goals of pursuing particular careers, did well academically, changed career paths, and managed to avoid raking up huge amounts of debt. They were able to do these things because they attended community colleges. I applaud Lanette and Nick for enrolling in their programs, taking their studies seriously, and eventually being honest about their desires. They learned about their fields of study, but more importantly, they learned about themselves. Again, what is the difference? Why is Nick considered a success and Lanette is not?

While I am happy Lanette and Nick earned good grades, and that Lanette is an attorney, those things are not required for a student to have a successful learning experience. I have had students get grades of "D" or "F" and still have successful experiences at PGCC. For most of these students, A&P is the first class where the program gets serious. Human A&P is biology, chemistry, math, and a foreign language all rolled into one course. Some students do well and move forward. Some students, like Lanette, do well and move on to something else. Some students do not do well and move on to something else. It is okay to be in that last group. I recently saw Scott Gallo-way, professor of marketing at NYU Stern School of

Business, say that young people should not focus on pursuing their passions—they should pursue careers doing things they are good at. Sometimes students make it through their struggles, but often when a student hits a wall in a particular class or program, the best course is to move on to something else: something they are good at. That could be a different program at the community college, or perhaps it means dropping out altogether. For instance, if that student realizes that nursing is not the right career option, then they have had a successful educational experience.

One of the many problems with focusing on completion rates is that we do not even know what percentage of our students truly have the goal of completing a degree. Regardless, people inside and outside of the College will look at our current completion rate and say it is now our goal to increase the completion rate to some arbitrarily determined higher number. It benefits nobody to have a mismatch between the actual goals that our students have and what someone imagines those goals should be. Chasing after an arbitrary goal does not serve our students well—it wastes time and resources, and it causes needless frustration among the faculty. Whatever their goals are, all our students deserve excellent teachers, helpful advising, financial support, and other services to help them achieve those goals. Those who complete their degrees should be recognized as successful and celebrated. And those students who come to the College to try something new, even if it does not work out as planned? We need to acknowledge their successes and celebrate them as well, rather than writing them off as failures.



## Fostering Active Engagement by Bringing Technology into Math Classrooms

Dr. Berrin Kilicarslan, Assistant Professor, Mathematics, Wor-Wic Community College

“No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship”, (Dr. James Comer, 1995).

Every student and teacher is unique, so there is no universally effective teaching or learning approach that fits all. However, when teachers and students meaningfully connect, there is enormous potential for success in math and other subjects. While it is not always possible to find this vital connection, educators and students should collaborate with openness and willingness to achieve positive outcomes. The intended meaning of Dr. Comer’s quote describes the connection between the students and what they are learning (Mullins). This connection can be facilitated in many ways. One of the ways of creating this connection is by bringing technology into math courses.

### The Increasing Role of Technology in Math Education

Using technologies such as virtual collaboration tools, mathematical software, interactive whiteboards, Wacom tablets or computer linked projectors, and learning management systems (LMS) effectively continues to take on an increasingly vital role in education, especially in subjects like math and other STEM fields. For instance, many of the previously mentioned technologies help to represent mathematical concepts visually and provide additional opportunities for learners to see and interact with mathematical concepts (Picha).

On the other hand, LMS serves as a centralized platform for all learning resources, materials, and assessments that students and teachers can use to access educational content in one place, streamlining the learning process. This centralized approach ensures consistency in content delivery and makes it easier for learners to access relevant resources at their convenience (Solutions). As a corollary, tech tools provide extensive opportunities to enhance instruction, engagement, collaboration, and learning outcomes. Integrating technology also supports differentiated instruction to meet diverse students’ needs. It helps students make connections between

topics, connect concepts to real-world applications, visualize abstract ideas, and develop a growth mindset (Scharaldi).

Since COVID-19 necessitated remote and hybrid learning models, many educators now believe technology should be integrated into all courses. Tech integration is especially key for traditionally challenging subjects like math. Developers have created numerous innovations specifically to improve STEM/math education. When planning to integrate technology into courses, educators should consider that students will need to be taught how to use that technology. Therefore, instructors should provide best practices for teaching technological and mathematical content.

### Key Benefits of Tech Integration in Math Classrooms

Integrating education technology tools into math classrooms provides many benefits, including:

- **Increasing engagement and motivation.** Interactive simulations and manipulatives make learning math more engaging and motivating. Students feel more confident engaging with technology-based learning tools than traditional teaching methods.
- **Enhancing visualization.** Graphing software, 3D models, scientific calculators, and geometry tools help students better visualize abstract concepts.
- **Expanding collaboration.** Online platforms facilitate collaborative learning experiences that support problem solving and flexible thinking, allowing students to learn together remotely. Teachers can provide customized resources and customized learning practices.
- **Increasing creativity and critical thinking.** Conducting virtual experiments and video tutorials fosters computational thinking, problem-solving, design skills, and other higher-order cognition skills.
- **Improving accessibility and inclusion.** Using



## Fostering Active Engagement by Bringing Technology into Math Classrooms

educational programs and learning management systems support skill development by providing instant feedback.

### Effective Classroom Integration Strategies

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While technology offers many benefits, tools should be integrated strategically to best support educational goals. Teachers must thoughtfully select and incorporate technologies—not just add them for the sake of using tech. When leveraged intentionally, technology can greatly enhance math comprehension, achievement, and retention.

Here are some key techniques I use to effectively integrate tech into my STEM math courses:

### Virtual Collaboration Tools

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Platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and Panopto enable online learning and collaboration. I use Zoom to record video lessons and Panopto to post recordings in our LMS. These recordings can be used for virtual classes as well as in-person classes. If students miss class or need to review previous material, these posts allow asynchronous learning for them.

### Mathematical Software

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Tools like TI-84, GeoGebra, and Desmos are essential for higher-level calculus sequence math courses as well as precalculus and algebra courses. They are essential for the instructors to support the idea visually as they are covering the topic. I use TI-84 emulator software on laptops to enhance math instruction. It allows me to display the TI-84 interface and demonstrate calculator workflows in real-time as well as take screen captures of TI-84 seamlessly and integrate those photos into lesson docs.

### Interactive Whiteboards, Wacom Tablets or Computer Linked Projectors:

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One of the great features of using interactive white boards and Wacom tablets or computers linked with projectors is to allow the instructors to manipulate the activities, such as

adding text, diagrams, or dropping a TI-84 calculator screen into a document. By using these features, I save the lessons and activities that I present during the class hours and it allows me to upload my lessons to each course under the LMS. It also engages students to revisit the lesson whenever they need to refresh their memory about how to solve the problem.

### Online Learning Platforms

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By using online learning platforms, instructors can integrate assignments, quizzes, and supplemental resources into their LMS. These platforms are essential as a supplement to classroom learning and provide additional practice, tutorials, and videos. Assigning homework regularly allows students more practice, which is essential to master the skills needed for the math course. Since online learning platforms have a feature to provide questions with different versions, it also gives the students more practice until they fully understand the concepts. The other benefit of online learning platforms is the “message instructor” tool, which allows the instructor to give immediate feedback or hints when the students have difficulty with solving problems and benefits their learning experience. I intentionally keep the send-and-receive message option open when I create my courses through LMS, which also improves communication between the student and their teacher.

### Actively usage of LMS

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Math videos, class recordings, and other interactive content, as well as online learning platform assignments, can be embedded in the LMS to promote engagement and make conceptual learning more concrete. This LMS feature allows all math lessons, assignments, quizzes and supplemental resources to be sequenced and tracked via the LMS to maintain continuity in the curriculum. It also makes it easy for students to access all assignments and additional resources in one place.

LMS is also useful in collecting the data that shows how students perform in their course. It tracks their progress,

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## Fostering Active Engagement by Bringing Technology into Math Classrooms

how actively they participate in course assignments, and their test scores. This data is crucial for me to see where students are struggling and when to take necessary actions. This data can be used to improve my course delivery and design methods.

The LMS announcement tool provides a valuable channel for me to interact with my students and reinforce key information. Announcements allows an instructor to highlight upcoming due dates for assignments, remind students to review certain materials, clarify instructions, and broadcast other course updates.

### Ongoing Innovation and Growth

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Educational technology will continue advancing, so faculty must commit to continual learning and integration. When leveraged thoughtfully, technology can make math more motivating, engaging, and effective for students. By embracing innovation, I have observed technology significantly improve my students' willingness to participate, as well as their overall performance in class. But further progress requires openness to new ideas and willingness to explore emerging tools. Tech must remain a consistent focus if we aim to prepare students for their futures.

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## The Netflix Essay

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“What’s the last show that you binged or watched?”

This is a common warmup question I ask students in the beginning of a semester when teaching a college English composition course. In this digital age, it seems like everyone is always watching something, and it is an effortless way to connect students to common interests, to each other, and to the professor. Spring 2019 was the best and worst time to ask this question—the best because students were engaged and excited to answer, but the worst because of how much time they spent doing it. That was the semester when “Avengers: Endgame” dropped in theaters, as well as the much anticipated (and much hated) “Game of Thrones” series finale episode. More than once, we went well beyond the time allotted for a warmup question because there was just too much to discuss between those two franchises. Eventually, the classes established rules for spoilers: Everyone got a month to see a movie in theaters and one week to watch the latest episode of a show. After that? Spoilers were allowed. When students realize that everyone is watching the same show or movie, it creates a micro community within the classroom. They do what every professor dreams of: they willingly talk to each other and to the professor! After spending multiple semesters trying to motivate students to feel passionate about their major essays, this was a breakthrough. So, how can students combine that excitement for their shows with drafting an essay in English? Enter: “The Netflix Essay”.

According to Statista, Gen Z makes up 34% of the daily Netflix viewers, 19% of Amazon Prime viewers, and 16% of Hulu viewers (“Frequency of Hulu”; “Frequency of Using Amazon”; “Frequency of Using Netflix”). With the influx of dual enrollment students on community college campuses, it is fair to say that a decent chunk of those students will have recently binge-watched a show. Once I have found a show that most of my students have seen, and after we make pacts about spoilers, I segue into a lesson about story arcs. I draw the arc on the white board and have a group of students come up to the board to map the plot of their show. The group walks the class through their show’s story arc. They give examples of exposition,

rising action, climax, falling action, and the final resolution. It’s a lightbulb moment for students as they get away from their desks, speak to the class about something they know and are familiar with, and all while making connections to English. I then tell the class that we are going to treat every essay like it is one of their favorite shows. From that point on, I break down their first essay into what one would typically find in a show, starting with episode one.

### Episode One: The Introduction

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“How many of you have started a show, but turned it off after watching the first episode?” Everyone, including myself, has found first episodes – or pilot episodes – to fall flat. Why is this? What are pilot episodes for? Pilot episodes provide the exposition for the entire story. They lay the groundwork, introduce characters, pique interest, and leave many viewers eager for episode two. At least, that is how they should work. But pilot episodes are often dull due to cheesy dialogue, slow pacing, confusing facts, weak special effects, and bad character development. Pilot episodes are also usually where the cast and crew are attempting to find their footing, which the audience can feel. The pilot episode can make or break it for the viewer—the same could be said for the introduction to an essay.

Essay introductions should grab the readers’ attention. My least favorite way that students attempt to grab the readers’ attention is, “According to Merriam Webster dictionary...” This is not new or invigorating. It feels cliché, which is another reason viewers do not stick with a series. I tell my students this: If they know what they want to see as a viewer of a show, let us make that work for us as writers. Let us take advantage of the introduction to set the stage for an incredible essay that the reader will want to binge. The opening should really wow the reader, shock them, make them angry, pull at their heartstrings, teach them something, or even throw in a plot twist. And finally, to truly make the reader want to immediately start episode two, they should create a captivating thesis statement, which we could liken to foreshadowing in the shows they

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## The Netflix Essay

watch. I encourage my students to write an introduction that ensures we move past the pilot.

We spend several class periods devoted to the pilot/introduction. We study appropriate language that avoids the cliché. We study various thesis statements from textbook essays and online sources. The students write their thesis statements on the board and the class provides feedback in a workshop style. I poll the class on what types of introductions grab their attention and we tie that into Aristotle's Triad. The students must decide on whether they will employ logos, ethos, and/or pathos in the introduction, depending on their audience and their topic. But the goal must always be to make the reader want more. If the students can successfully push through the pilot, they can start working on the body, starting with episode two.

### Episode Two (and beyond): The Body Paragraphs

The number of episodes will depend on the number of paragraphs you are requiring your students to write. These episodes/paragraphs will get us through the rising action, climax, and eventually to the falling action. We will still individually study each paragraph, though, to mark its use and establish its purpose. For example, when watching a show, sometimes the audience is privy to another character's point of view. Students can do this within their essay by providing a counter argument. In a show, they utilize flashbacks. Students can do this within their essay by providing the historical background of the topic they choose. In shows, the characters typically face a conflict, which, when polling my students, is the reason they stick with shows. Students will need to create conflict or an argument to defend within their essay that echoes their thesis statement. If done well, the readers of the essay will become wrapped up in the conflict, just like they would if they were watching a show. With all these audience-grabbing TV show tactics in mind, an important question for students to remember in these body paragraphs is: Who is their reader?

Knowing the audience can make or break it for a show, as well for an essay. The students in my classes write for themselves, as well as for the other students in the class

and for me, their professor. I conduct a peer review within the classroom for nearly every essay because it helps the writer to have immediate feedback from a reader, much like a test audience. Choosing a constricted topic and immediately embarking on a technical journey might not work for a generalized audience. I once had a student who wanted to write an essay about NASCAR engines. I explained to the student that it would be best, from a reader's perspective, to start simple and introduce more complex terms and information as he scaffolded the essay. That way his peers, who would be reviewing the essay, could follow along. The student did not follow my advice and went straight into the most technical essay about NASCAR engines. During peer review, students were constantly looking up terms, asking the writer questions, and struggling to understand his thesis. With the right crowd, the essay might have been a smash. But for the sake of an English 101 course with a generalized audience, it was a flop. It is true that it is easier for a student to write an essay that they are passionate about. However, the student still needs to ensure reader engagement. The entire point of writing this Netflix essay, or any essay, is to make it binge worthy.

The worlds of "The Witcher," "Doctor Who," "Vampire Diaries," "Stranger Things," "Umbrella Academy," "Lord of the Rings," and countless others, offer viewers the opportunity to live in another time and place. They show breathtaking visuals of golden elven kingdoms that are full of lush forests, cascading waterfalls, gorgeous sherbet sunsets, and oceans that are as clear as a Carolina sky. These shows invite viewers to become committed to storylines that feature politics, familial and generational histories, war, love, heartbreak, conquest, rags to riches, discoveries, transformations, magic, religion, or the supernatural. It can be fantastically addicting. It also makes it incredibly difficult to compete with. But why compete when students can learn from these techniques and adopt them for their essays?

Even in the body of an English 101 essay, students can introduce "characters" to the reader. One way to encourage this is to require students to conduct a personal interview as one of their sources. These can be victims, witnesses, and/or subject matter experts. Students can

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weave in those characters throughout the essay. This will help make it more personal for the reader, making them care about the topics and situations. It also helps students become more engaged in the research process. Students can implement imagery as they paint powerful pictures of the problems they want to address within their essays, or through hypothetical scenarios that accurately illustrate their argument. Whatever students enjoy seeing in a show, they can try those same tactics when writing, which includes the euphoric falling action and the series finale: The conclusion.

### The Finale Episode: The Conclusion

How do you end something utterly magnificent? Do you break hearts? Do you rip of the Band-Aid, ending it quickly? Do you let the viewer choose their own ending by leaving them with something abstract? Or do you leave them standing by, ready for more – a cliffhanger? No matter what, loose ends should be tied. Does it have to have a happy ending? No. That is not realistic. But the viewer/reader should not have residual concerns or questions. Many readers may remember the show “Lost,” which *Variety* magazine ranked as having one of the worst series finales of all time (Khatchatourian). The show was pure chaos and such a joy ride at the same time, but it brought up more questions than it could provide answers for. Once the series finale arrived, the writers had found themselves on a slippery slope of leaving the viewers in purgatory, which (spoiler alert) is where all the characters of the show might also be. Purgatory is not where students should leave their readers. In the students’ introduction, they should have drawn readers in and packed such a powerful punch of a thesis statement that, come time for the finale, readers are ready for closing arguments. No matter how the student chooses to end the essay, my advice is to always leave the reader with something memorable.

The next time you watch a show, bring it into the classroom. Even if the conversation bleeds into your lecture time, it may in fact be worth the trade, as it can get the students talking and excited. Students do not have to fall in love with English to be successful, but they should learn how these skills are relevant to their daily lives. They can learn to find these tools in unexpected places. The

college English class does not have to be the dry, headache-inducing, rigid curriculum that it is often stereotyped to be. It can be just as newsworthy and entertaining as the latest popular Netflix series. As faculty, let us highlight a show’s ingenuity and show the students how it is done. Let us use the digital world our students live in to make connections with them and between them. Let us also use this world to illustrate the importance of good, clear communication and how their newly gained skills will translate to their lives outside of our classroom walls.

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# Story and the Reflective Leader

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## Background & Purpose

In an increasingly diverse society, the role of a reflective leader becomes more essential. In the “experiential learning model” described by Kolb, 1984 (as cited in Guthrie & Jones, 2012), reflection is a key element. This four-part model of learning involves the experience, the “abstract conceptualization” of the experience, “reflective observation,” and “active experimentation.” Revisiting an experience leads to new insights and actions in the future—a process that is essential to learning and application as a leader (p.55).

Although reflection is often thought of as a solitary act, more collaborative approaches lead to greater understanding of others in a critical reflection of self. Through these reflective dialogues, learning communities are established (Marvis & Ayas, 2003). An “organic” style of learning evolves in communities that begin to share their experiences and their stories (Roberts, 2008).

## Reflective Leadership

Denstein & Gray (2001) discuss “critical reflection” as central in the development of a leader. Critical reflection is defined as the ability to question personal assumptions and learn from personal experiences (p.119). A reflective leader assumes the position of a role model when they can demonstrate the ability to question themselves and views of others. Social dynamics of the leader and follower relationship is evident in the critical reflection process (p.122).

Mirvis & Ayas (2003) reviewed group dialogue as another mode of reflection that is advantageous to leaders and followers in a diverse community. The communicative value of sharing life stories breaks cultural barriers and assumptions, thus creating bridges in diverse settings. Through dialogue, deep connections are formed developing a sense of community and understanding. An authentic leader coordinates a community where members feel

safe to share their true selves with the group (Schwahn & Spady, 1998). Aidman & Long (2017) propose that to be effective, leaders must understand the dynamics of culture and change. Additionally, stories may be the catalyst for cultural understanding in educational communities.

## Conclusion

Story creates intimacy and authenticity. “Such self-reflection, sharing these stories-between self and others transforms personal reflection into reflective dialogue” (Mirvis & Ayas, 2003, p.45). The value of stories as personal narratives that engage communities through indulging oneself to a community they serve is relevant for future study in various diverse contexts. There is a necessity for more research specifically in the educational community as our environments become increasingly diverse. In addition, modelling and training of purposeful storytelling to future leaders is an important aspect of reflective practice, seeing ourselves and sharing with others.

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