INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Losing My Control Instead of My Mind

During the past three semesters, I experimented with changing my Learning Management System (LMS) course layout to improve my students' success and knowledge retention. I made some mistakes and learned a few lessons along the way. It ended up being a smashing success, but not in the way I imagined it would be.

I had no idea I was such a control freak until the past few semesters. Even before the switch to online learning, I knew that when teaching hybrid courses—courses where more than 50 percent of content is self-guided—I needed to make my LMS course "shells" more intuitive, student-centered, and engaging. After taking some inspiring professional development workshops about student engagement theory and practice led by our eLearning support team, I started experimenting with using short videos to communicate reminders to my students and to teach mini-lessons. But ultimately, I felt like those additions were just superficial.

In 2020 when the world frantically moved to online content delivery and virtual classrooms, I was eager to sharpen my educational technology tools and learn how to be as engaging virtually as I am in a face-to-face class setting. But I was also sick to death of the way my LMS course shells were organized. I was spending half a day every weekend relabeling assignments with deadlines, relabeling all the weekly folders with the current semester's dates, and shuffling content between folders because of the current semester's schedule. (I typically teach three or four related, but very different courses each semester.) In the summer of 2020, I discovered two new features in our LMS, Blackboard Learn: The learning module component and the Adaptive Release feature.

That summer, I took a level-one training course through the North Carolina Community College System Virtual Learning Community to become a certified online instructor. One of the lessons explored how to save time and frustration by organizing content by topic instead of by week. So simple and elegant! The research is clear—students understand more and retain more when content is grouped by topic, not time. And our LMS already had its own learning module component complete with a table of contents, similar to a SoftChalk web-based lesson.

I spent the rest of the summer creating multiple-page LMS learning modules with content, assignments, and quizzes in all of my fall course shells. A key feature of the learning module components is that students can't skip pages inside them until they have read all the pages in order at least once. Great, I thought, students will be forced to learn the content before they try the assignments. And they will be able to go as fast as they want because the content and assignments will be revealed at each student's pace. That's perfect!

Unfortunately, it wasn't perfect. In fact, the learning modules barely functioned. I quickly realized they are best for static content, and did not function well with quizzes and assignments, which was just a quirk of the programming. Meanwhile, fall classes were already underway. I scrambled to convert all the special learning modules into regular content folders that could support scored items as well as content items. I also had to post a table of contents for each module so students could see the big picture. In two frantic, very long days, I dismantled what had taken me two months to build, brick by brick.

Gone, however, was the forced sequencing I had been so excited about. I wanted to get that precious control back and make students learn the content my way. Our helpful eLearning support team said Adaptive Release, another Blackboard feature, could be used to emulate the forced sequencing of the learning module component, but I would have to manually add Adaptive Release to every item in the whole shell, as well as the trigger for revealing the next item—a little toggle button at the bottom of the prerequisite learning activity students have to click to switch from saying "Mark Reviewed" to "Reviewed." Two more days of intense shell development and it was ready.

That fall was a rocky semester. Inevitably, in every course shell there were one or two places where a release criterion was pointed to the wrong prerequisite and the whole chain of content and assignments would break down for everyone. Also, students tended to ignore my plentiful advice about clicking the trigger button, meaning their chain of learning activities would appear to be over. Students couldn't see anything new in the folder, so they thought there was nothing due, even though the list of assignments and their due dates were posted on a table in the same folder. Inevitably, everyone ended up being late most of the time and their learning was haphazard at best. Even though I added programmed banners that said, "End of folder" when they had revealed the final item, almost all my conversations with students comprised of answering the same two questions: "Why can't I see this?" and "Why did I get a zero for something that wasn't on my due date calendar?" Growing pains, I thought. An unfamiliar shell layout, I thought.

Fast forward to the spring 2021 semester. Although the assignment deadline changes were practically automated now, I was still spending as much time every week fixing release criteria errors as I ever had rearranging and relabeling things in the dated weekly folders. Most student conversations still had nothing to do with the course content itself, only the availability of items. I learned that in our college's LMS, if a student can't see an assignment because of Adaptive Release, it also doesn't show up on their calendar of due dates or in their gradebook of past assignments until I manually enter a grade. And, of course, some students just went through and clicked all the "Mark Reviewed" toggles to get everything to show up for them, and then proceeded to skip all my carefully sequenced learning activities to jump to the scored assignments anyway!

I was losing my mind with frustration and more than a little resentment. The students were losing their minds with stress and confusion. It wasn't good for anyone. So, six weeks into the semester, I removed all the Adaptive Release rules in all my courses and all the "Mark Reviewed" buttons. It was like I flipped a switch on motivation and productivity—both mine and my students'. The rest of the semester proceeded on greased wheels!

In the summer, I reflected on the module experiment of the last eighteen months. Without the intrusive Adaptive Release/ Review button combo, the true glory of modules was revealed! Gone are the days of changing the assignment descriptions every semester for the new due date. With modules, those are on the LMS assignment calendar and submission pages only. Gone are the days of moving items to a different week's folder to keep the workloads appropriate. With modules, the learning sequence for each topic is uninterrupted. I can spend more time clarifying concepts and procedures for my students. Modules are just as wonderful as I had hoped they would be when I originally learned about them.

My course shells are, of course, still living documents. For example, I am shuffling the order of topics to alleviate confusion and I am refining layout features to help students improve their time management. I tweak my course shells as needed, but by organizing my online content by topic instead of time, I am no longer losing my mind from constantly maintaining them. My spring students performed better than any cohort before them because they were able to take back the reins of their education. Although the typical percentage of my fall and spring students earned a C or better, there were more A's and B's and fewer F's than ever before in my higher education career. I think the students felt a morale boost from being trusted as learners because they were generally more open to asking me for help and from answering each other's questions. I credit the improvements in student success and engagement entirely to the module format, and to losing my control so the students can regain theirs.

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