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Start with the Student, Not the Tool! [1]

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In online learning, it is easy to get distracted by the shiny object, the best new thing, the latest and greatest. With all the interesting and powerful tools that are available out there for teaching online, it can be easy to get sucked into thinking, “Hmmm...what kind of assignment can I think of that would allow me to use this tool?” Don’t fall for it! While there certainly is nothing wrong with having a list of tried and true digital tools you like to use in your online courses, the tool itself is NOT the place to begin crafting an assignment.

How Do I Begin?

Start with the student! In other words, what are the learning goals or outcomes you want your students to be able to accomplish when they leave your course? What do you want them to be able to do as a result of completing specific assignments? Once you have a clear picture about your learner outcomes or goals, you can start to think about how you can use online tools to help your students get there.

Now Do I Look for Tools?

Not quite yet. First you need to think about the teaching strategy you think would be most effective to help students meet a particular learning outcome or goal. One way to shift your thinking is to begin by asking yourself “How would I teach this assignment in the classroom?” Perhaps you would have students break up into small groups? Or do a presentation? Or work in pairs to solve a problem? Would you have them do a debate? Or work together on a literature review? Or conduct research to identify contemporary examples? Or create their own case study? The options are varied and limitless. The key here is that your thinking is focused on the student and their learning goals rather than the technology.

Tool Time!

Once you decide what teaching strategy you want to use, *then* you can look for a tool that you can use in the online environment to implement your learning strategy. Now you can revisit that toolkit you have been building to see if any of the tools that have caught your eye might be a good fit. You will want to find a tool that *supports* the method you have chosen. The important part of this step is to understand that the goal is **not** to replicate the experience that students would have with this strategy in a face-to-face classroom. Rather, the goal is to adapt the learning experience to a different modality — an online classroom.

For instance, a debate in an online environment can still be effective, yet operate very differently. You might have students meet at a prescribed time and argue their positions synchronously using an online conferencing tool like Zoom, or redesign the experience so that the debate takes place over the course of the week using an asynchronous tool such as VoiceThread, FlipGrid or the Discussion tool in Canvas using video, audio, or text. The key to adapting the work to the online modality is to make sure that you set up the assignment with clear directions and enough structure and support so that students know exactly what they need to do, when they need to do it, and how it needs to be done.

Student-Centered Questions to Think about When Choosing Your Tool

When choosing your tool, it is essential to continue to examine potential tools by *keeping your students' needs at the core of your decision*:

Synchronous or Asynchronous
Do students need to conduct this activity in real time? Even though an activity is conducted synchronously in the classroom, you can often rethink it so that students can complete activities together on their own schedule. This is one of the big advantages of an online course! Online discussion forums and tools like Google Docs are common examples. In those situations where students DO need to be working together in real time (a course teaching mediation is a good example) a tool like Zoom would likely be a better fit.

Technical Expertise
Do students already know how to use this tool? If not, is the tool intuitive, how long will it take to learn and is the learning experience worth the time? Is there an easier tool they can use to meet the same learning goal?

Integration with the Learning Management System (LMS)
Will students be able to access this tool from within the LMS (e.g. Canvas) or will students be required to leave the LMS to authenticate into a separate site? When possible, try to use tools that are already integrated within your LMS to avoid students being required to sign in to multiple sites.

Technical Support
Is there an institutional Help Center or quality online resource that students can rely on if they have a question about how to use this tool? Who should they contact if they get stuck? It is

essential to have adequate resources in place to support students when problems arise.

Protecting Wallets and Privacy
Is this tool free? Will students be required to sign up for an account? Is the tool reputable? If the student uses this tool, will their work be visible to the public? Does the tool include the ability to adequately adjust privacy settings? It is essential that you consider all of these issues, and is especially critical if the tool you are considering is a blog or social media tool. For a variety of reasons, some students may be particularly sensitive to having any personal information posted online and this concern must be considered when selecting tools for required assignments.

Student Choice
Would it work for students to complete this assignment using a tool of their own choosing? Video assignments or presentations might be a good fit for this category. If this is possible, then it saves students time in having to learn a new tool and reduces the need for technical support.

Expectations and Clear Directions
Have you provided students with all the information and resources that they need up front in order to be successful using this tool? To avoid wasted time and frustration, it is essential that you are thoughtful about clearly providing students with the details they need before they get started.

Most importantly, don't forget that the focus of the assignment should be about the *experience* that you want your students to have, independent of the tool. As you move through this process, be sure to continually refer back to your learning outcomes or goals to assess if the tool you have chosen will help your students to meet those stated outcomes. If you start to find that the focus of the experience is drifting away from the stated learning outcome and is becoming more about learning how to use the tool itself, it's probably time to reassess!

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