Student Engagement of Canvas Materials

Notes from Zoom Conference Call

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**Issue: Some students are not engaging with the Canvas material.**

* Some are not doing Canvas homework
* Some will post to a discussion but not reply to others.

Rachel Polakoski is a math instructor at Cuyamaca. She is in her second semester of using the OLI materials embedded in Canvas. In Rachel’s class almost all students are productively engaged with the homework Canvas. We asked her for some tips.

She described numerous strategies designed to motivate student engagement, such as

* [Norming student expectations](#_Norming_student_expectations)
* [Inquiry into reasons for problematic behaviors](#_Inquiry_into_reasons)
* [Clarity about what is due and when](#_Clarity_about_what)
* [Other strategies](#_Other_strategies_for)

You can hear the conversation with Rachel here: <https://cccconfer.zoom.us/recording/play/PCtcpimn2TVwb0qC2BZR7Z_HnwL83BNNSjzSmPc6dXgTgHmbJrpEJlMxf4TGIlfl?continueMode=true>

## Norming student expectations

What does Rachel do to in class to norm expectations around doing group work and participating in Canvas discussions?

* From day 1 Rachel encourages students to talk about their experiences, problematize issues and to strategize with their peers to solve them. See her first day ppt here

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/12Mfa6UZ0t_11UkQJpJ1M61RP1iMUu9I7EScTf8gloPI/edit#slide=id.p4> This sets the stage for troubleshooting problems throughout the semester.

* We do some of what she does, e.g. the use of articles like *You Can Grow Your Brain* to emphasize the natural mental burn (frustration) when learning. But I was struck by the way that Rachel norms expectations around group interaction, both in class and in discussions in Canvas, and revisits these expectations in a supportive way throughout the semester.  
    
  See slides 6-10 in her ppt for examples: (1) Students generate a list about why they don’t like group work. (2) Rachel provides a compelling rationale for why her class centers around group work, both in class and in the discussions in Canvas. See survey of Fortune 500 companies “most valued skills”: work in teams and communicate clearly on slide 7, the Cone of Learning on slide 8, and comments from her previous students on slide 9. (3) Students generate solutions. See prompt on slide 10.   
  Rachel returns to this list of issues and solutions throughout the semester and asks students to add to it whenever issues arise that warrant it.

## Inquiry into reasons for problematic behaviors

In my view, Rachel has an inquiry mindset when it comes to problems that arise in her classroom. When Rachel observes a problem, she will ask the class to help her understand the issue and involves the class in coming up with strategies to troubleshoot the issue.

I was struck by the fact that she does not presume that students are lazy, unmotivated, or too busy to do the work.

Here are some interesting things she discovered from her students that were easy to fix:

* Early in the semester many students were not completing written assignments or responding to their peers after their initial post in a discussion. By asking students for their theories about why this was happening, she discovered that many students were working from the Canvas “to do” list. The Canvas “to do” list is generated from Canvas assignments with set due dates. Students working only from the “to do” list did not know about, or would forget about, other assignments, such as written assignments or discussion feedback. To address this, Rachel’s homepage now has a grid of assignments, including links, that is updated every class period. Her homepage also has a “daily diary” where she briefly describes what happened in class.
* Rachel also discovered that many students do their Canvas work on their phone and the phone app does not default to the homepage, where she posts homework, so she had a student use the document camera in class to demonstrate how to navigate the app to get to the homepage.
* Rachel set due dates for midnight. Many students needed to work after midnight to complete assignments, so Rachel shifted due dates to 7 am the next day. Homework completion increased.

Here is an example of how Rachel facilitates these types of conversations with her students:

Toward the middle of the semester, Rachel noticed that homework completion began to drop. This is the time of the semester when students start to be inundated with papers and exams from their other classes. In response Rachel uses an activity called *Strange Choices* to draw students into a conversation.

Here is a brief description of the *Strange Choices* activity: Students read a series of typical faculty complaints about students (no posts or replies on discussions, late to class, not doing homework, etc.) In groups students discuss some of their own personal choices that might appear strange to a teacher. As students share out, Rachel captures the strange choices on the board, then students propose solutions. Rachel said that students come up with great strategies on how to solve some of the problems, and students who may have been feeling despondent or hopeless will often reengage. Here is a link to this activity: <https://app.box.com/s/nn34u5r25dlh1dhfp1mgwcrx5lcbdge0>

## Clarity about what is due and when

Rachel’s homepage in Canvas has both a list of the most recent assignments with links to the actual assignment and a “daily diary” that briefly describes what happened in class. Made me think that our default homepage should be the Canvas syllabus. It is very easy to see what is due when, including when discussion boards close.

## Other strategies for addressing common problems:

*How does Rachel motivate students who are behind to catch up?*

Like many of us, Rachel attempts to talk individually to students who are behind, especially on a particular section, but she also makes smart use of the Canvas gradebook to send emails to students who are behind.

In the Canvas gradebook for a particular assignment, choose “message students who …” and then choose the appropriate category. Send out a positive and encouraging message with specific instructions for what the student can do to improve their grade. Do this frequently and immediately before students get too far behind.

For example, here is an email that Rachel sent to a few of her students whose grades were slipping.

We are nearing the halfway point of our semester, and I'd like to see you boost your grade in the course so you are set up for success for the rest of the semester and not scrambling last minute for "points".  
  
You are getting a lot of the homework done, but your weakest areas are the Module Checkpoints, Unit Checkpoints, and Labs. These are usually at the end of each module or unit. They also lock if you do not complete them by the due date. So it seems like you might be running out of time and are not contributing fully to these types of assignments.

If you can focus on these three things for the next two weeks, your grade will improve!:

* Modules 9, 10, and 13 checkpoints.
* TWO unit checkpoints due right before our exam on 3/21.
* TWO big labs at the end of Module 10.

Focus on these assignments. Pay close attention to the due dates and make some time to get it done! I am always here to help, just let me know what you need.  
  
I know you can be successful in this course, you just need to change a few things going forward.

*What does Rachel do to get students to provide high quality feedback to peers on the discussion items?*

* Pull up an example of a high-quality feedback in class. Discuss why it is high quality.
* Do a discussion item in class:
  + Have students respond to the prompt in writing; Rachel uses a topic that they do not really understand yet.
  + Groups then exchange papers and as a group practice providing helpful feedback to the initial posts they received.
  + Class shares out examples of high-quality feedback that they wrote.

*Does Rachel grade all discussion items?*

Yes, at the beginning of the semester, but not later in the semester. Later she randomly chooses which items to grade or chooses ones that she feels are the most important. For those that are not graded, she goes to the assignment and checks “not graded” so that the assignment is removed from the Canvas gradebook.

Rachel explains all of this to her students and emphasizes again the importance of discussing big ideas with others to deepen your own learning. In her experience, when she gets students engaged early in Canvas discussions, completion does not drop off when she stops monitoring all of the discussions.

That said, we all agreed that there are too many discussion items in the first version of the Canvas material. At LMC we will work to significantly reduce the number of discussion items, preserving only those prompts that are rich enough to warrant discussion.