6. "A Nice Change of Pace": Involving Students-as-Course-Users Early and Often

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Abstract: Thinking of students as "users" of a course's key elements (e.g., syllabus or learning management system) requires that instructors include students in the design process for crucial course elements "early and often." However, expectations often are that instructors' central course architecture, materials, and hence students' user experience be complete and usable before a class begins. Indeed, many instructors without a prior background in user experience (UX) research and practice might find the approach difficult to integrate with their current best practices. In this chapter, an instructor with preliminary expertise in UX shares how he sought to center students-as-users in a new pilot course by having them contribute to the design of the course syllabus and digital component delivered through Blackboard's learning management system (LMS) at the beginning as well as throughout the semester. This chapter explores both the challenges and possibilities of adopting an "early and often" approach to including students in designing a course's architecture. It describes the relevant activities and students' preliminary responses, and critically evaluates potential revised future application. Additionally, it discusses potential instructor resistance and institutional limitations to taking this approach. Finally, it draws attention to the possibilities for even a basic and provisional UX approach to support course content as well.

Keywords: UX pedagogy, user-centered design pedagogy, syllabus design, learning management system (LMS) design

Key Takeaways:

- Think of a course as a "user experience" and the assignments and key experience architecture elements—especially the syllabus and LMS—as integrated with institutional rules, norms, and expectations.
- Consider students expert end users of course materials when it comes to their experience and day-to-day use of course elements, that is, how they will (or won't) ultimately use them throughout the semester.
- Give students an opportunity to contribute early and often to the design and revision of course materials for which they will be held responsible, especially the syllabus and LMS organization.
- Consider, where possible, ways to integrate user experience perspectives with the course content and not simply its functional delivery, for example as part of a course exploring what it means to be "culturally competent."

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Including Students in Course Design

As a new assistant professor in Texas Tech University's (TTU) Technical Communication and Rhetoric program (housed in the English department in the College of Arts & Sciences), I was assigned to teach "ENGL 2312: Texts and Technologies that Connect the World." This second-year English course, designed to help meet TTU's institutional "multicultural core requirement," had students explore the use and consumption of texts and technologies around the world. The course was designed to be flexible, with the pilot syllabus bringing together two challenging core concepts: "intercultural communication" and "usability." As I developed the course's first iteration, two questions persisted:

- How could I deploy insights from usability or the larger umbrella discipline of user experience research (Potts & Salvo, 2017) to better teach these concepts to undergraduates?
- How could I better design individual in-class experiences for undergraduate students to facilitate their learning?

Pedagogical instruction has long emphasized "student-centered" approaches using "backwards design" methods to identify that course's student-learning outcomes (Ambrose et al., 2010; Davidovitch, 2013; Hannafin & Land, 1997; Wright, 2011). However, thinking of user experience as an "academic practice" (Crane & Cargile Cook, this collection) can more effectively refine how we help students achieve these learning outcomes. User experience (UX) thinking expands our attention to identify often obscured material and relational dynamics intersecting in students' experience of our courses. For me, positioning the students as course "users" complemented and improved upon traditional approaches to student engagement early on in class as well as throughout the semester.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how thinking of the ENGL 2312 class as a "user experience" inspired two early class activities focused on the syllabus' design and the course Blackboard site. My description and analysis of these classroom activities' design and students' engagement with them in this project fell within TTU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) exemption for studies in "established or commonly accepted educational settings" (#IRB2020-870). The activities also illustrated for students the complex, real-world dynamics of our course topic, "cultural usability." Additionally, students began practicing critical mindfulness as they engaged with the course's texts/technologies. This experience provided me with a foundation for deploying this approach in future versions of this class and others, including in asynchronous, 100 percent online courses, and even graduate courses. This approach, too, creates interesting possibilities for pedagogy in a wide-range of courses, departments, and disciplines, regardless of whether instructors have a background in UX research.

Texts and Technologies that Connect the World

Developed and approved prior to my joining the Technical Communication and Rhetoric (TCR) faculty in Texas Tech University's English department, ENGL 2312 fit nicely into our program's Bachelor of Arts in Technical Communication (BATC) major and minor. As determined by the university, courses had to help students develop and demonstrate "intercultural awareness" as well as "exhibit the ability to engage constructively with individuals and groups, across diverse social contexts" by the end of the course (Texas Tech University, n.d.-a, n.p.).

ENGL 2312 was designed to be flexible, allowing individual instructors to approach it from their unique perspectives while meeting core requirements. Teaching the course in the fall of my second year at TTU, I closely followed the sample syllabus provided to me in the original course proposal. Because this was to be the first time this version of the course was taught, I treated it as a "pilot" course and invited students to think similarly throughout the semester.

Institutionally, the course grew out of the fact that:

> Technology increasingly extends the reach of individuals and groups across borders: national/political borders, linguistic borders, and cultural borders. Engineers, technical communicators, and professionals are asked more and more to design texts and technologies that reach and work across those borders. (Texas Tech University, 2021)

The class aimed to help students:

> explore the definition and role of "culture" and what it means to be "culturally competent." . . . [To] learn about the ways writing and writing technologies shape and are shaped by the cultures in which they are used. . . . [T]o understand that technologies are developed for particular users in particular contexts and that in order to effectively design technologies and documents, technical communicators must become invested in cross-cultural communication and mindfulness. (Texas Tech University, 2021)

We used two textbooks, *Cultural Intelligence* (Thomas & Inkson, 2017) and *Cross-Cultural Technology Design* (Sun, 2012), supplemented with readings from technical communication and inter/cultural studies. Students completed four major assignments: two "praxis papers," an individual research project, and a final design group project. The two praxis papers had students practice analyzing specific texts and technologies and then asked them to engage in and reflect upon a cross- or intercultural interaction. The individual research project required students to use Stuart Selber's (2010) categories for organizing digital instruction sets to identify and analyze an instruction set for its potential delivery across cultures. The final project asked groups to identify a text or technology and redesign

it for cross-cultural use in accordance with the insights, skills, and frameworks we had discussed, analyzed, and used in class.

The course essentially covered two complex concepts in conjunction, both potentially unfamiliar to undergraduates: cultural competence and usability. Culture is a challenging enough concept to teach on its own as it is broad and all-encompassing in terms of what it defines and influences. Adding to this the concept of usability only compounded the challenge. While user-centered design, usability, and user experience stand as distinct, discrete objects of study and methodological approaches to design and inquiry, they share a common concern with the *user*. In wrestling with how to think with my students about "culture" and how texts and technologies are used in any given context, it became obvious that the way forward was to begin with the first two "commandments" of the user-centered design process: "thou must involve users early and often" (Still & Crane, 2016). So I began by asking *students* how they thought we might best approach the questions, and what they would prefer as users of the course apparatus and content.

Ultimately, I most explicitly involved students at the beginning, consulting them about the material presentation and configuration of the syllabus and our course home page delivered through the university-designed learning management system (LMS), Blackboard. This approach disclosed to me how thinking about user experience as an academic practice held a great deal of potential for student engagement and deeper learning. It also fits with the growing desire to apply "user" engagement to pedagogy and to build on traditional pedagogical approaches to active student learning.

Conceptual Frameworks/Precursors

Liza Potts and Michael Salvo (2017), introducing the concept of *experience architecture* (XA), recognize the slippery, conceptual porousness with which XA, UX, user-centered design (UCD), and human-centered design (HCD) are deployed. Theirs is a big-tent, "global" perspective on XA. They aim to support researchers and practitioners who are "putting work in usability together with an ecological approach to genre, information architecture, and document design to create a coherent approach to the complex work of the technical and professional communicator in emergent environments of work and play" (p. 11). They recognize similarities between their work in XA and the "work being done in educational technology under the banner of learning experience (LX)" (p. 7).

However, while *usability* as a research method and testing practice for developing end products has been applied to classroom artifacts, plenty of potential remains untapped for thinking about students as users of course documents as well as other elements (Crane, 2015). Furthermore, potential remains to connect usability—more narrowly focused on the product's "usefulness" as well as the method that tests that usefulness at a specific point in time (Crane & Cargile

Cook, this collection; Lallemand et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2012)—to the larger "experience" or "architecture" of student users.

User-centered design (UCD) is similarly concerned with keeping users central to product design and innovation and may rely on any number of methods to do so (Still & Crane, 2016). UCD, like usability, has been applied to the design of classroom contexts and especially online learning environments (Greer & Harris, 2018). However—like usability—UCD remains more narrowly concerned with users' and distinct products' interactions.

This distinction between UCD/usability and the larger user experience is important because course elements like syllabi and an LMS remain complex systems (Crane, 2015), integrated into other intersecting, networked systems, with many stakeholders that may not share instructors' or students' needs as users. Of course, keeping users at the center of any product design (UCD) as well as testing the specific usability functions of any course element is important when developing a more usable experience architecture for students. But given the complexity of the system and pressures instructors often feel, it can be easier to simply focus in a general way on a document's, assignment instruction set's, or LMS's design's "usability" for students without consulting students (UCD) or connecting the notion of students-as-users to their larger experience as course users (UX).

My contribution here shows how instructors can begin including UCD and usability concerns in our course designs. Instructors with even minimal experience with UX concepts can begin using the basic principles immediately. Additionally, I illustrate how this connects to the larger user experience students have in a class, a department, and at a university as a whole. The principle that designers must consult users at the beginning of and throughout their design process is most clearly applicable to the act of designing a course, course unit, and even a daily activity. Thinking at the outset about how users will take up the texts or technologies we might design for them is crucial to developing the successful uptake of any product. As Brian Still and Kate Crane (2016) note, users' "mental models of the world" make product navigation possible. Designs must "integrate into [users'] models" or be adapted with "not a lot of effort" (p. 46). Furthermore, this process of consulting users should be iterative and ongoing. As components are added to a design or even after a design has "gone live," designers "still learn from users by involving them" (Still & Crane, 2016, pp. 46-47).

Extending this insight to include "cultural" dynamics enables us to see the wide range of minute, banal, overlapping but often divergent ways people around the globe might take up anything we designed. While *cultural usability* is a complex topic, historically, it is concerned with the design of products for usability "cross-culturally," requiring critical analysis of the wider global context for any given local users (Sun, 2012). My prior work studying digitally mediated intercultural professional communication provided me with numerous opportunities to think through communication technology use in and across cultural contexts (Pihlaja, 2018).

What a broader UX perspective can offer pedagogically is a more nuanced perspective on students—namely, that they are operating within larger institutional and cultural ecologies or architecture that must be considered along with usability concerns or even student-centered approaches (Crane, 2015; Crane & Cargile Cook, this collection). Students take up every syllabus, textbook, instruction set, and LMS, putting it to use in order to navigate or implement the process of learning. Engagement with instructors, in class or even via comments on student writing, is also something that students have to put to use in some form or fashion (Still & Koerber, 2010). Recognizing this reveals the need to position students as active users of anything instructors produce for or transmit to them.

Since many instructors do not get formal pedagogical instruction in graduate programs, only subject area expertise, their early teaching career focuses on "what I (or my discipline) want(s) students to understand or be able to do." As instructors gain more experience semester-to-semester and year-to-year, student "personas," students as actual users, are iteratively re-imagined based on those who have taken the course before, succeeding or failing in various ways each year. Syllabi, instruction sets, and assignments are then refined prior to the next semester in order to improve outcomes this time around (and hopefully heading off negative student evaluations). Developing insight into students as users over years of teaching experience in order to adapt is certainly part of an instructor's professionalization process. However, adopting a UX approach to working with students earlier in one's career can potentially provide faster, more efficient insights into what students in any given semester or academic year might need from an instructor.

Uniquely, UCD recognizes that you have to include users directly in the design process if you are to head off design disasters or poor overall UX environments before implementation. Indeed, the qualification "early and often" (Still & Crane, 2016) asks designers to include users not only before but throughout the implementation of a design, be it product or process. Ideally, students become co-creators of the course architecture, and the overall effect is that of a more participatory design approach (Spinuzzi, 2005) to developing course materials and in the case of the LMS, something like Michael Salvo et al.'s (2009) "discursive technology."

It makes sense that design affects usability in educational contexts, which in turn must impact success in learning (Jones, 2018). Indeed, when it comes to syllabus design in particular, Natasha Jones (2018) makes a compelling case that students should be positioned as "expert end-users" of the documents in the course "ecology." We might also see students as expert end-users of the whole course as a product. A course exemplifies experience architecture in that it is a "process of building a variety of experiences for a wide range of users, and then accounting for strategic decisions with stakeholders who determine whether these projects and programs are worth maintaining" (Potts & Salvo, 2017, p. 6). And as Kate

Crane (2015) argued, the usability of the syllabus must be considered along with the larger ecological experience of students at a university.

Of course, instructors might be hesitant to position students as "experts" because they may feel it doesn't match their experiences with students over the years. It may also cut at the heart of how instructors see themselves: as imparting expertise where there is little or none. Acceding expert status to students may feel like conceding instructors' role and status—one's whole reason for being a teacher. Significantly, students may also feel this way and be suspicious of instructors who do not perform competence and confidence in the learning environment or class-as-product in ways they have been enculturated to expect.

Again Jones (2018) draws attention to the fact that students are, by definition, experts in how they will (or won't) ultimately use any given course element. They can also articulate to some extent what it is that facilitates or impedes their comprehension of and engagement with course document designs and structures (Jones, 2018). Additionally, students can articulate how they are "using" course activities and assignments to pursue their learning in a given semester. Furthermore, the process of consulting, testing, and reflecting on course elements with students has the potential to aid the pedagogical goals of the course, using students' agency as "expert end users" of a course as learning product to engage course content itself more critically and deeply.

Syllabi and LMSs are both known quantities whose role in American university course culture is accepted and ubiquitous, both as concrete tools for course delivery (e.g., Blackboard is the required LMS for all undergraduate courses at TTU) and in our cultural lore ("It's on the *syllabus*!"). Because these elements are introduced early in the semester, it makes having an early discussion about their design and functionality more feasible. Yet precisely because we need them early, the syllabus typically must already be written when a class starts. Because this is often a requirement of institutions, including students in its composition or design process can be a challenge.

Syllabus co-construction is by no means an original concept (Buchanan et al., 2017; Hudd, 2003; Kaplan & Renard, 2015). Teachers have incorporated it in a variety of disciplinary fields, recognizing not only its value for fostering student engagement, but also its ability to build a new layer of accountability into the learning process. Still, concerns remain that—however noble one's intentions—students are either too socialized to certain kinds of practices/activities to express much creativity in their contributions (Hudd, 2003) or are simply not prepared for the challenge, especially given the material complexity and likely confusion amidst a student's first weeks on campus in a given semester (Fornaciari & Dean, 2014).

Here, thinking of students as users or end-users and not simply as individuals to be motivated or to be held (however creatively) "accountable" for course materials may be more productive. It recognizes possible reasons for students' lack of engagement separate from either intrinsic psychological concepts of motivation

or the somewhat paternalistic moral framework of "accountability." Instead, it acknowledges that a student's "hang-ups" engaging with course material might be at the point of use (usability), or because documents were not designed with them in mind (UCD), or because course elements fit awkwardly or at odds with the larger experience architecture of the university in which they move, and work, and have their academic being (UX).

Any attempt at participatory design, or collaboration, or co-construction is a risk. But UX as an innovative academic practice requires reasonable risk-taking. In the case of the ENGL 2312 course I taught, the fact that the course was something of a pilot design that I had taken over somewhat unexpectedly freed me to embrace the uncertainty and invite my students to do the same by drawing attention to the risk and the purposes for it, and asking them to join me in thinking critically about the course document design and organization. Consequently, I let these two artifacts "hang out there," partially unfinished and open, as we engaged them together during early class periods. What did this look like? Next, I give examples from my own experience provisionally practicing this approach.

Students as Users of the Course Syllabus and Blackboard Site

When my pilot course commenced in the fall of 2018, 17 students were enrolled. The majority (ten) of the students were technical communication majors and were familiar with usability as a disciplinary area of research and testing. Four, however, were majoring in STEM or STEM-related fields: mathematics, computer science, biology, and architecture. One student was a university studies major with English designated as one of their three areas of focus. Another was a sociology major. One student was undeclared at the time the course began. All were second-year students and above. Three were in their final year as undergraduates.

I wanted to build our 120-minute, twice-weekly course meetings around a mixture of small and large group discussions of the assigned texts while actively engaging with the technologies that we had used previously. Drawing attention to texts and technologies that showed up serendipitously in our world over the course of the semester was one possible way to generate discussion about course-related topics and themes. It would enable us to move back and forth between a more abstract academic mode of inquiry and our shared material experience.

Whether online or in person, any class will already share cultural expectations and practices around one text and one technology in particular: the course syllabus and the LMS. So over two separate class periods early in the semester, I guided students as they reviewed the course syllabus and the Blackboard shell from their perspective as users of that text and technology. We looked first at the syllabus and then at the shared Blackboard course shell.

Re-Designing the Syllabus

To enable students' participation in (re-)designing the syllabus, at the beginning of an early class period, I placed students in groups of three to four and assigned each group a subsection of the syllabus to review. One group focused on the course description, objectives, and materials section; another, the assessment criteria for grading; another, the course policies; and finally, another, the course calendar.

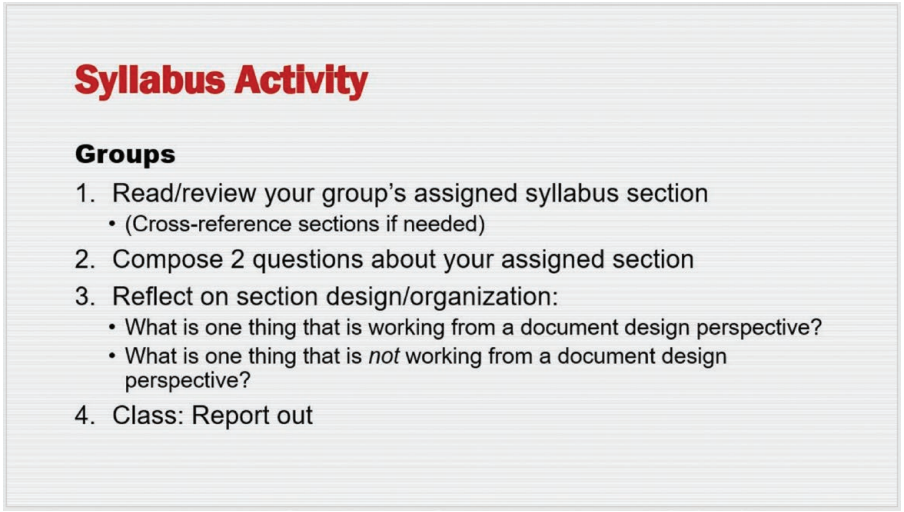


Figure 6.1. PowerPoint instructions slide from Fall 2018 syllabus redesign activity.

I first asked students to articulate the syllabus section's content as they understood it, putting the substance of the section in their own words. This was akin to a "syllabus quiz" an instructor might assign in the first week or two to make sure students had read and understood the syllabus. I then required them to articulate two questions they had about the content (Figure 6.1). Finally, I asked them to identify something they liked about the design of their assigned section of the syllabus and something that made it easier to use, as well as something they didn't like about the design and something that made the document difficult for them personally to use. These last two activity requirements followed Brian Still's (2016) assertion regarding UCD that "by focusing as soon as possible on user needs and wants, the design is exposed to more eyeballs, the important eyeballs of the users, and potential big problems are discovered and addressed before they become too big to be fixed" (p. 26).

At the end of the class period, we came back together to discuss each group's summary, their questions, and their positive and negative insights regarding the documents' design. Outside of class, I also assigned them to complete a reflection on their experience of the activity using guiding ques-

tions about the act of conducting the exercise/activity itself (see Appendix A). Students then uploaded these reflections to Blackboard. These activity questions and responses also served as a record and prompt in the manner of a "retrospective recall" method for priming study participants to think about their recent use of a particular tool (Russell & Oren, 2009). I could also refer students to their individual activity reflections to initiate discussions specific to the syllabus in later classes.

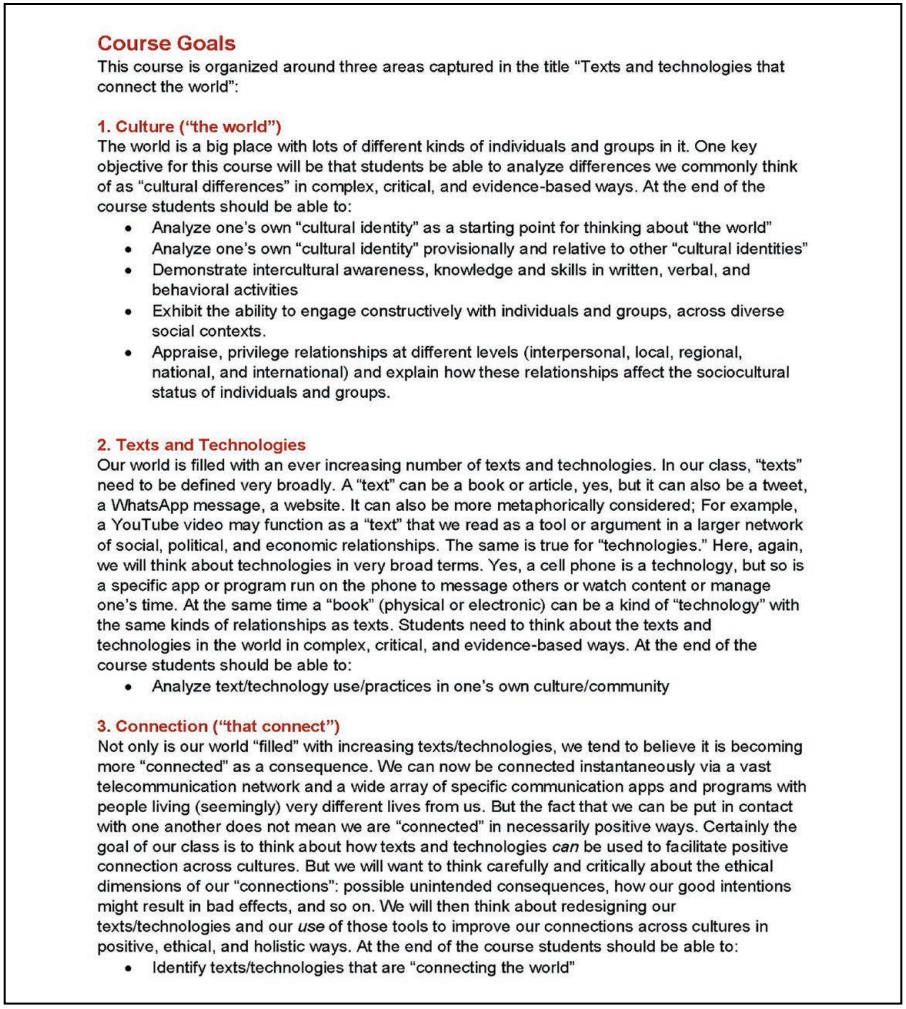
Student Response to and Discussion about Syllabus Redesign Activity

As part of our discussion, I asked clarifying questions about students' summaries. I made sure to answer their questions about the content, but I also asked my own questions, seeking deeper insight into their likes and dislikes about the design of the document. Additionally, I proposed design changes to see if they would help improve students' capacity to "use" each section on the syllabus. I also made a point to then actually implement as many of their suggestions as I could after the exercise (refer to Figures 6.2 and 6.3 for comparisons).

The activity was especially useful for obtaining insight into my students' perspectives as "users" of the course content I had built, specifically the syllabus as a text. As Crane (2015) and Jones (2018) previously argued, it also afforded me the opportunity to make visible to students the kinds of institutional limitations or obligations I had in composing my syllabus (e.g., including specific language regarding plagiarism or accommodations and citing specific operating policies). Incidentally, this also supported our discussion of the course's content as it gave us a shared object around which we could explore a university, a department, a major, even a single class as a "culture" that "uses" a text in certain ways, under certain limitations, to certain ends.

Some of the students' design insights were admittedly basic. For example, they complained that several sections were text heavy combined with minimal paragraph "chunking," making reading a section all the way through with comprehension difficult. Like most instructors, I suspect, I had originally composed the syllabus with a focus on content, on what I wanted to say about each component. As a professional writer, I also know I am longwinded, given to running over my word limits with stunning regularity. But hearing in an immediate way from students that the syllabus was hard to engage—that is, to *use*—precisely because it was so wordy made concrete and real something I would no doubt have identified abstractly as a design problem with all my syllabi if asked to provide a self-critique of the document.

Our discussion drew to the forefront how cumbersome the original text of certain sections was (Figure 6.2). Engaging with students about, say, whether the explanatory preface for each course goal area was *really* necessary in this document for what they would use it for (it wasn't) led me to revise that section in particular to make later reference to it easier (Figure 6.3).



Course Goals

This course is organized around three areas captured in the title "Texts and technologies that connect the world":

1. Culture ("the world")

The world is a big place with lots of different kinds of individuals and groups in it. One key objective for this course will be that students be able to analyze differences we commonly think of as "cultural differences" in complex, critical, and evidence-based ways. At the end of the course students should be able to:

- Analyze one's own "cultural identity" as a starting point for thinking about "the world"
- Analyze one's own "cultural identity" provisionally and relative to other "cultural identities"
- Demonstrate intercultural awareness, knowledge and skills in written, verbal, and behavioral activities
- Exhibit the ability to engage constructively with individuals and groups, across diverse social contexts.
- Appraise, privilege relationships at different levels (interpersonal, local, regional, national, and international) and explain how these relationships affect the sociocultural status of individuals and groups.

2. Texts and Technologies

Our world is filled with an ever increasing number of texts and technologies. In our class, "texts" need to be defined very broadly. A "text" can be a book or article, yes, but it can also be a tweet, a WhatsApp message, a website. It can also be more metaphorically considered; For example, a YouTube video may function as a "text" that we read as a tool or argument in a larger network of social, political, and economic relationships. The same is true for "technologies." Here, again, we will think about technologies in very broad terms. Yes, a cell phone is a technology, but so is a specific app or program run on the phone to message others or watch content or manage one's time. At the same time a "book" (physical or electronic) can be a kind of "technology" with the same kinds of relationships as texts. Students need to think about the texts and technologies in the world in complex, critical, and evidence-based ways. At the end of the course students should be able to:

- Analyze text/technology use/practices in one's own culture/community

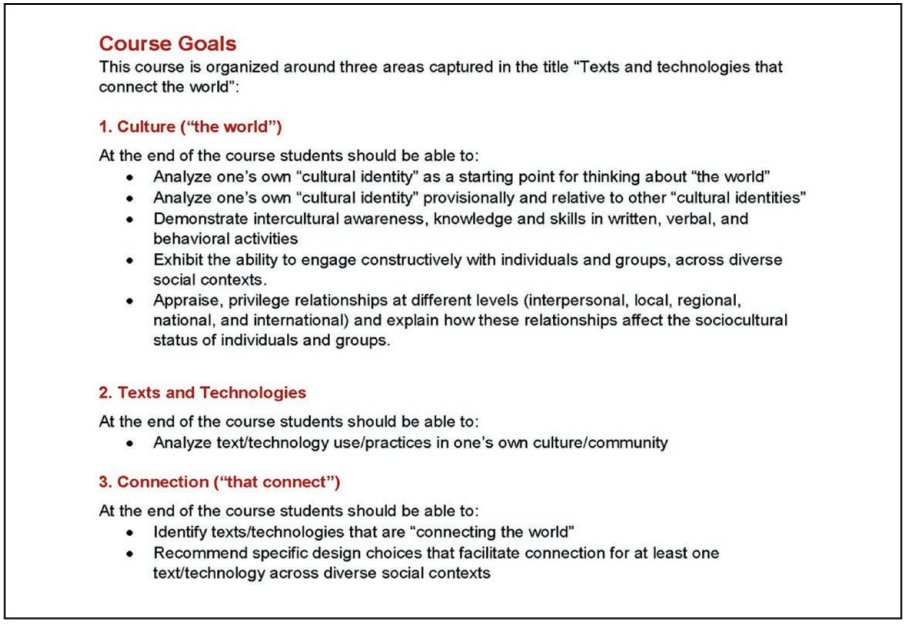
3. Connection ("that connect")

Not only is our world "filled" with increasing texts/technologies, we tend to believe it is becoming more "connected" as a consequence. We can now be connected instantaneously via a vast telecommunication network and a wide array of specific communication apps and programs with people living (seemingly) very different lives from us. But the fact that we can be put in contact with one another does not mean we are "connected" in necessarily positive ways. Certainly the goal of our class is to think about how texts and technologies *can* be used to facilitate positive connection across cultures. But we will want to think carefully and critically about the ethical dimensions of our "connections": possible unintended consequences, how our good intentions might result in bad effects, and so on. We will then think about redesigning our texts/technologies and our *use* of those tools to improve our connections across cultures in positive, ethical, and holistic ways. At the end of the course students should be able to:

- Identify texts/technologies that are "connecting the world"

Figure 6.2. Original design of Fall 2018 syllabus course goals.

This process of modeling revision also allowed me to call attention to how groups organize their cultural expectations around power, who can exercise it, how they can exercise it, what its limitations are, and how people view it differently even within groups who share other characteristics (language, ethnicity, geography, etc.). This discussion was especially valuable, given the content of the class (i.e., considering the role of one's culture on a text or technology's usability). We could discuss the discomfort they felt either with being asked to help design this core course element or with my expressing uncertainty (given my status both culturally and institutionally) as an "expert" about what should be in this document or what they needed.



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- Analyze one's own "cultural identity" provisionally and relative to other "cultural identities"
- Demonstrate intercultural awareness, knowledge and skills in written, verbal, and behavioral activities
- Exhibit the ability to engage constructively with individuals and groups, across diverse social contexts.
- Appraise, privilege relationships at different levels (interpersonal, local, regional, national, and international) and explain how these relationships affect the sociocultural status of individuals and groups.

2. Texts and Technologies

At the end of the course students should be able to:

- Analyze text/technology use/practices in one's own culture/community

3. Connection ("that connect")

At the end of the course students should be able to:

- Identify texts/technologies that are "connecting the world"
- Recommend specific design choices that facilitate connection for at least one text/technology across diverse social contexts

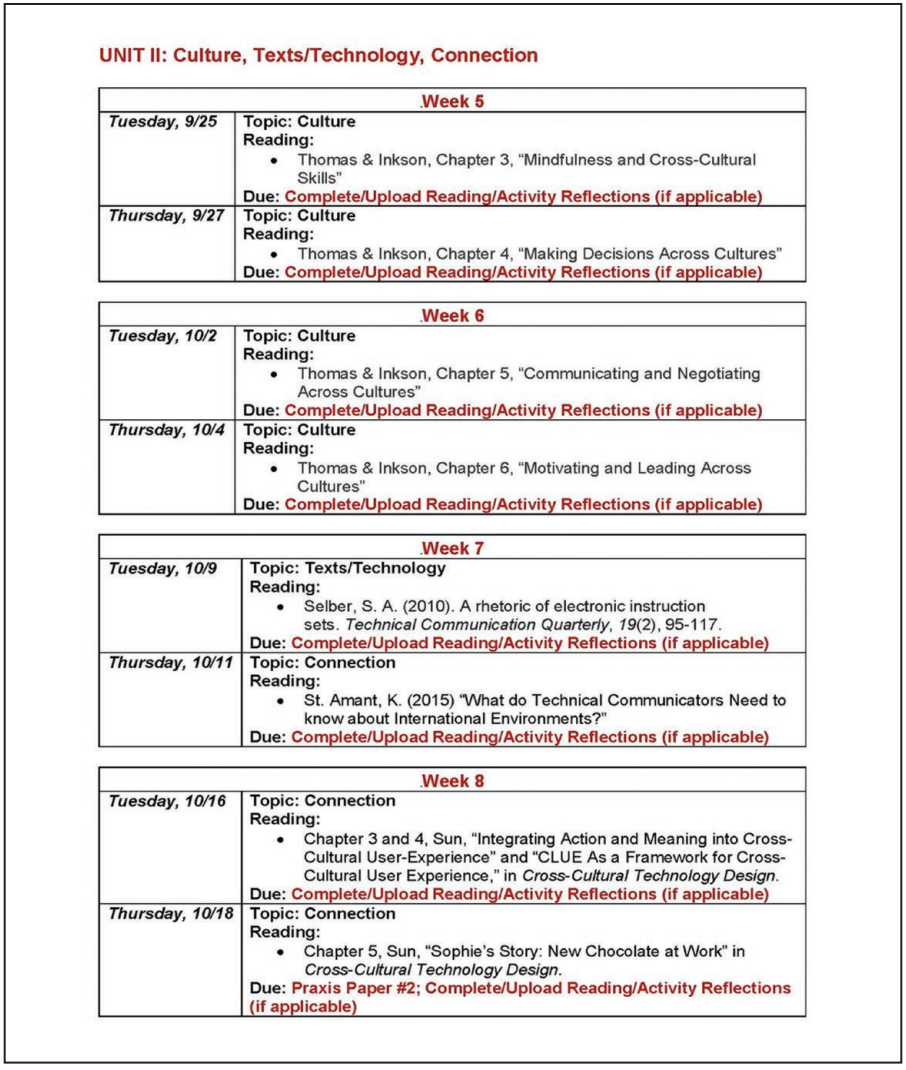
Figure 6.3. Redesigned Fall 2018 syllabus course goals.

As a class, we found some shared humor in an instance of "cultural miscommunication" whereby I, as a new faculty member at TTU, had thought myself quite clever using the university's red and black color scheme to render headings and points of emphasis throughout the document (Figure 6.4). Without realizing my intention, students asserted (quite forcefully and in one instance with a hint of disgust if not horror) that red was an "angry" or anxiety-producing color—especially when I used it to highlight assignment due dates. After some discussion, while we agreed that the red-black color scheme made a kind of sense from a design perspective, from an affective perspective connected to the document's use (i.e., knowing when an assignment was due without getting excessively anxious), we decided I would use a "cooler" shade of blue to emphasize key points (Figure 6.5).

In reflecting on the activity itself, students did not seem particularly taken with the process. Most of their reflections were of the banal sort one sometimes gets early in a semester when students are still getting acclimated to instructors' expectations, such as "it was interesting," with no further detail provided. This, too, may have been because a syllabus is a fairly well-known cultural artifact, one students use frequently (cultural lore notwithstanding) and are often quizzed about.

But the benefit of taking this approach to me as an instructor should not be discounted. It helped position students not as incorrigibly ignoring the syllabus, but as end users who may find the document or text unwieldy in very

specific ways. And while students certainly had obligations to consult and use the syllabus in the shared activity or our class, taking the stance of a designer relative to students' positions as end users and making changes in response to their insights only increased the likelihood that they would actually use the text I had created. Their insights into their reaction to the colors, a suggestion they made to shorten the titles for assigned readings in the course calendar, and a suggestion to adjust the amount of white space in the "to do" sections of the calendar all aided my revisions (refer to Figures 6.2 and 6.3)—and, in fact, gave me insights I also applied to other classes' syllabi.



UNIT II: Culture, Texts/Technology, Connection

Week 5	
Tuesday, 9/25	**Topic: Culture** **Reading:** • Thomas & Inkson, Chapter 3, "Mindfulness and Cross-Cultural Skills" **Due: Complete/Upload Reading/Activity Reflections (if applicable)**
Thursday, 9/27	**Topic: Culture** **Reading:** • Thomas & Inkson, Chapter 4, "Making Decisions Across Cultures" **Due: Complete/Upload Reading/Activity Reflections (if applicable)**

Week 6	
Tuesday, 10/2	**Topic: Culture** **Reading:** • Thomas & Inkson, Chapter 5, "Communicating and Negotiating Across Cultures" **Due: Complete/Upload Reading/Activity Reflections (if applicable)**
Thursday, 10/4	**Topic: Culture** **Reading:** • Thomas & Inkson, Chapter 6, "Motivating and Leading Across Cultures" **Due: Complete/Upload Reading/Activity Reflections (if applicable)**

Week 7	
Tuesday, 10/9	**Topic: Texts/Technology** **Reading:** • Selber, S. A. (2010). A rhetoric of electronic instruction sets. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *19*(2), 95-117. **Due: Complete/Upload Reading/Activity Reflections (if applicable)**
Thursday, 10/11	**Topic: Connection** **Reading:** • St. Amant, K. (2015) "What do Technical Communicators Need to know about International Environments?" **Due: Complete/Upload Reading/Activity Reflections (if applicable)**

Week 8	
Tuesday, 10/16	**Topic: Connection** **Reading:** • Chapter 3 and 4, Sun, "Integrating Action and Meaning into Cross-Cultural User-Experience" and "CLUE As a Framework for Cross-Cultural User Experience," in *Cross-Cultural Technology Design*. **Due: Complete/Upload Reading/Activity Reflections (if applicable)**
Thursday, 10/18	**Topic: Connection** **Reading:** • Chapter 5, Sun, "Sophie's Story: New Chocolate at Work" in *Cross-Cultural Technology Design*. **Due: Praxis Paper #2; Complete/Upload Reading/Activity Reflections (if applicable)**

Figure 6.4. Original Fall 2018 syllabus schedule design.

UNIT II: Culture, Texts/Technology, Connection

Week 5	
Tuesday, 9/25	**Topic: Culture** **Reading:** • Thomas & Inkson, Chapter 3
Thursday, 9/27	**Topic: Culture** **Reading:** • Thomas & Inkson, Chapter 4

Week 6	
Tuesday, 10/2	**Topic: Culture** **Reading:** • Thomas & Inkson, Chapter 5
Thursday, 10/4	**Due:** ***Praxis Paper #1*** **Topic: Culture** **Reading:** • Thomas & Inkson, Chapter 6

Week 7	
Tuesday, 10/9	**Topic: Texts/Technology** **Reading:** • Selber, S. A. (2010). A rhetoric of electronic instruction sets. (linked on Blackboard)
Thursday, 10/11	**Topic: Connection** **Reading:** • St. Amant, K. (2015) "What do Technical Communicators Need to know about International Environments?" (linked on Blackboard)

Week 8	
Tuesday, 10/16	**Topic: Connection** **Reading:** • Sun, Chapters 3 and 4
Thursday, 10/18	**Due:** ***Praxis Paper #2*** **Topic: Connection** **Reading:** • Sun, Chapter 5

Figure 6.5. Redesigned Fall 2018 syllabus schedule design.

More substantively, this exercise set the stage for us to consult with each other about the arrangement of the schedule, when things were due, and how they worked to scaffold and relate to one another, culminating in the final project. While we agreed to complete the class as initially designed and planned, we talked about the relationship of assignments to one another and the due dates, and whether there was enough time to reasonably complete one assignment before the next, in some cases actually shifting due dates around. These discussions indicate the potential a UX approach, particularly in assessment, might have for class design and pedagogy.

On the last day of class, while debriefing the course, we explored more radical redesign options—for example, requiring the "final" project be completed *first* and using it as a shared artifact to work collectively towards deeper understanding of cultural competence applied to text and technology design. Whatever objections

they or I had to these kinds of negotiations, the status of the course as a new "pilot" course helped us extend leeway to one another. But I do wonder whether we could take this approach *every* semester, regardless of the status of the class. Indeed, to ask these questions every time is to accept that students' needs and user practices are not all the same and that the culture of the class changes from semester to semester, if not more frequently.

Designing Blackboard for Student Use

To position students as the users of Blackboard for the class, I took a similar approach as with the syllabus. I first asked students to describe how they had used Blackboard in previous classes. Because instructors' LMS use across campus can be especially idiosyncratic (or non-existent), students' user experience with it can be uneven. I then invited students to engage in a simple paper prototyping activity (Snyder, 2003). Students first drew their own "ideal" LMS interface, for example, sketching out a course site's home page, labeling links and content areas, listing out subfolders, even sketching buttons or images. Finally, I asked them to draw their ideal *Blackboard* interface. We discussed their answers to my initial questions in class. Later, I had students reflect on this activity as well, uploading it to Blackboard (see Appendix A).

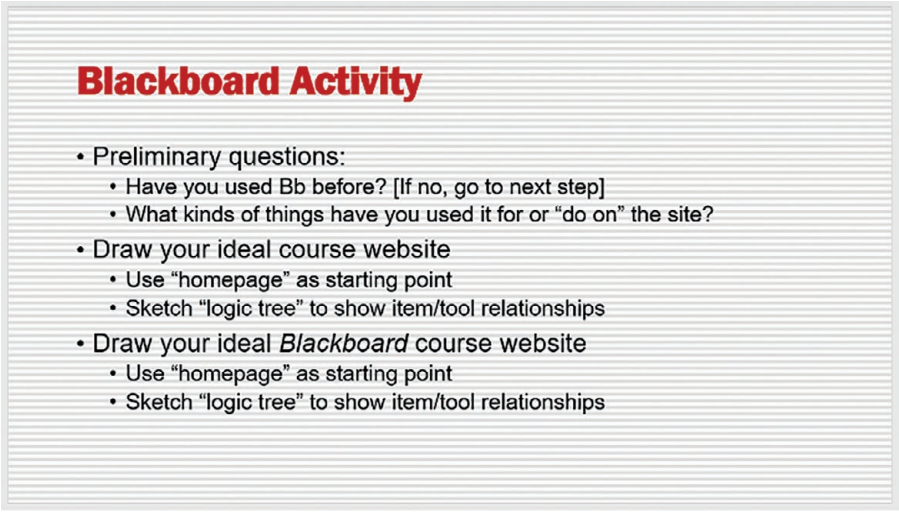


Figure 6.6. PowerPoint instructions slide from Fall 2018 Blackboard design activity.

Student Response to Discussion About Blackboard Design

The in-class discussion regarding how students might use and design their course Blackboard shells was markedly livelier than our discussion around the syllabus. Based on several student reflections, which I will discuss in a moment, I suspect

this reaction was because the exercise was relatively novel—they had never been invited to comment on how their course website was or should be organized or designed (whether hybrid, online, or as supplement to in-person courses). However, the drawing exercise proved minimally useful. Many of their sketches were incoherent or incomplete and did not support our follow-up discussion especially well. This may have been because I did not provide them with examples of what such drawings should look like or really much other guidance about what their drawings *could* look like. At the time, I was more concerned that I not inadvertently telegraph that I was looking for something in particular or otherwise distort their original ideas with my suggestions. Consequently, the activity was also likely overwhelming for most students—drawing a whole web page in only a few minutes. As I discuss below, in a second version of the class, I have focused the activity on drawing a page with their ideal path for completing a significant but discrete task (see Appendix C).

Whereas students are more familiar with a syllabus and its possibilities and purposes as a text or cultural artifact, the Blackboard back end is something of a mystery—or at least it was for my students in the fall of 2018. However, this activity allowed me to make visible some of the constraining limitations that shape a technology like Blackboard in a way I had never done before. In terms of engaging course content, it also proved a useful starting point for talking about how we as technical communicators were learning to be culturally competent consumers, users, and producers of texts and technologies.

After the students reflected on their previous use of Blackboard and imagined an ideal organization for a course LMS, I brought up the blank course shell home page in edit mode to show them how things looked to me and what was involved in setting up assignments in this context (Figure 6.7).

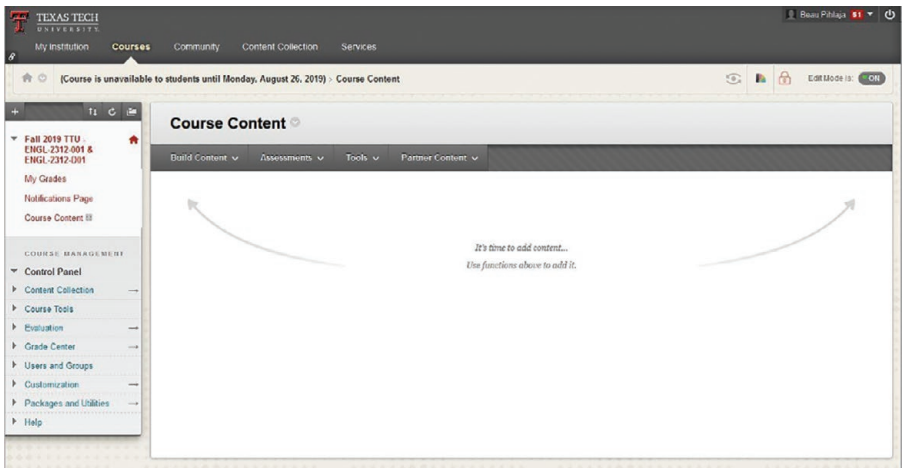


Figure 6.7. Blank Fall 2019 Blackboard home page shell (identical to Fall 2018, which was filled in as class went).

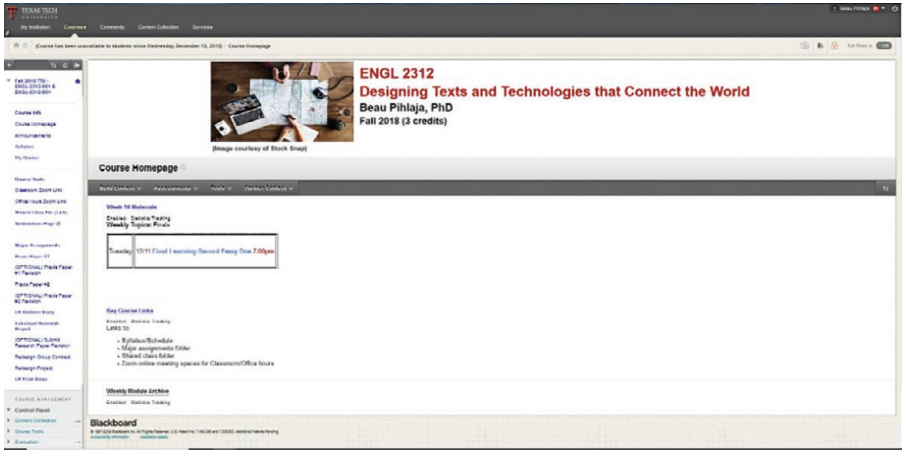


Figure 6.8. Completed Fall 2018 Blackboard home page.

Because I had left it blank, I was able to walk them through the material mechanics of setting up assignments, uploading documents, making announcements, etc. We were able to discuss what information would be most useful where and how it might best be presented so they could navigate it most easily. This gave students a say in the final layout (Figure 6.8) as well as set the groundwork for discussing cultural expectations and usability for a course LMS.

We discussed at length how they would like the frequent reading response assignments to be organized and labeled online such that they would know what response was due when. Here, my students provided perfectly reasonable suggestions from a *user's* perspective—many of which I applied (e.g., shortening the titles to "RR[#]"). But I also took the time to show them the process for creating an assignment and what options and affordances were available to me in Blackboard's instructor view (Figure 6.9). This activity also gave me an opportunity to explain the difference between using a folder/sub-folder organization method vs. my preferred approach of using weekly learning modules to organize content and assignments together. I was also able to discuss principles of "modularity," that is, how instructors-as-users segment content as much as possible to facilitate *re*use from semester to semester.

One student initially suggested I designate each reading response "RR[#]"—which I did—followed by the date the response was due (e.g., "RR1 9/3/18"). This made perfect sense, again from a *user* perspective. But I drew their attention to the fact that, while adding the date to a title was perfectly viable for *this* semester, as an instructor, I had to use this template from semester-to-semester or build it from scratch every time. Putting the dates in the title meant I would have to go and manually edit the new due dates in each title every semester, as in the area designated "Due Dates" in Figure 6.9.

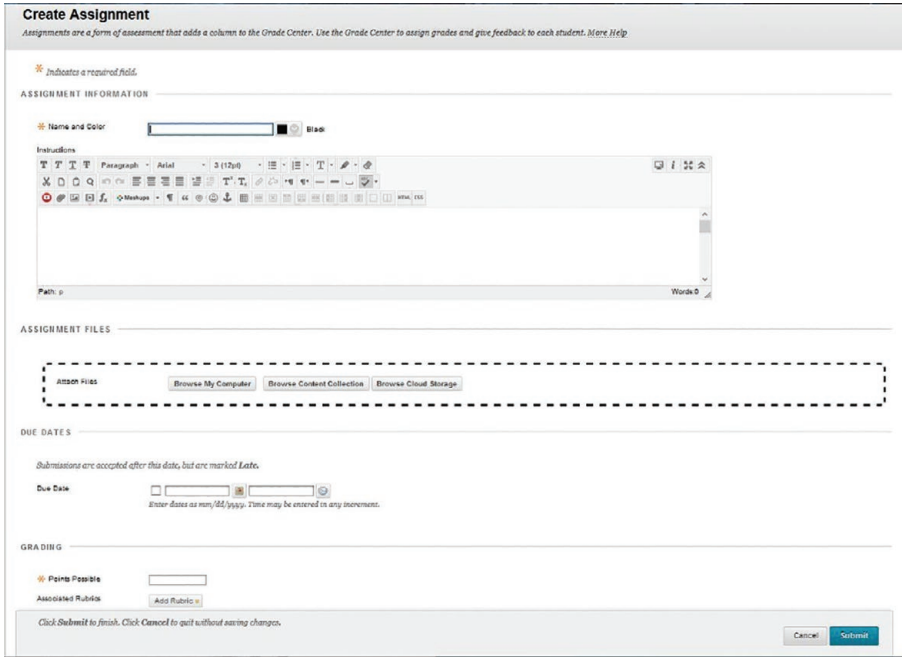


Figure 6.9. Blank Blackboard "Create Assignment" page.

While certain design choices may be feasible for a single course element over one semester, multiplied over dozens of individual components, even with a comprehensive checklist, instructors as course experience architecture designers risk not only error but also exponential compounding of that error over time. Students recognized the constraint for the final reading response assignment layout (Figure 6.10) as a reasonable trade-off between usability and technical limitations. I also tried to assist them by placing the reading responses in the module for the week they were due. That said, students still struggled a bit to determine what reading response assignment was due when.

This allowed me to illustrate how different users' needs/preferences might clash as we hashed out a design that worked. It also enabled me to remind them that—in addition to my desire to think of *students* as users—as an instructor, I, too, am a user of these texts and technologies with constraints, needs, and desires for how I use them day-by-day or semester-by-semester.

This particular example also dovetailed nicely with our course content discussions around possible cultural differences that show up even in mundane, everyday ways (e.g., how we represent dates and time). While it is customary in the United States to represent months and days in that order, many other nations represent them in the reverse: day then month. This added a cultural competence dimension to the discussion.

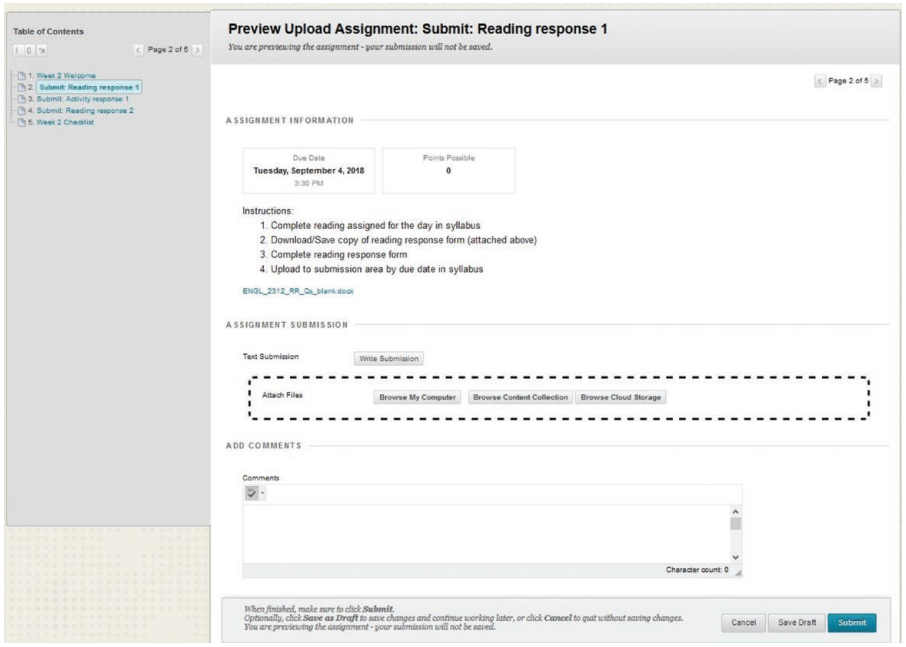


Figure 6.10. Original assignment upload preview screen for reading response assignment.

Students were able to see that not only did we have to contend with the individual preferences and constraints we had in the class at TTU in the fall of 2018, but if the class, its texts, and technologies were to "connect the world" per our course description, we would have to consider the potentially global impact of even small differences. Indeed, we returned to the day-month example several times throughout the semester. In explaining what a "redesign for cross-cultural connection" of some existing text or technology might look like for their final projects, I called back to this example. I suggested that if one were to "redesign for cross-cultural connection" our course website, they might develop a plug-in or module that would enable assignments on a course calendar to be updated automatically any time an assignment's due date/time was changed. You could also propose a toggle that would allow users to convert the representation from month-day to day-month automatically, per the preference of any student.

In contrast to students' largely ambivalent reflections on the syllabus redesign activity, the response from several students to the Blackboard design activity was starkly stronger and positive. More than that, however, students seemed to recognize how strange it was that they'd never been asked to contribute to the design of either Blackboard or its use in an individual class. Mason, who was especially thoughtful in his responses throughout the semester, commented,

> I wondered why a professor would ask the students what they want in Blackboard. . . . This is definitely a positive thing, but every other college course has just been dealing with the professor's preferred Blackboard layouts. It's a nice change of pace.[1]

It's not especially surprising that learning environments are instructor-centric. But it is important to note that being brought into the activity as a user, someone who might have something to say about course delivery, can be a pleasant one for students ("a nice change of pace"). This suggests to me a UX perspective's potential to improve student engagement with course topics and in individual courses.

Another student, Emily, put an even finer point on the value of this approach in her reflection on the activity: "It's really important that we are able to navigate this page, so I'm glad we were able to have a say in its composition." She was able to see why it was important, given that they were going to have to *use* the technology for the course. This demonstrated to me that students have the potential to see themselves as *users* of course materials and learning environments and not simply *consumers* of their content.

These responses were the fruit of the decision to position students not simply as consumers or recipients of course content from an expert, but as users whose capacities and experience would shape their success as students. The process gave us shared objects and artifacts to ground our learning together. This may not be a potential benefit available for every class. However, that possibility should not be dismissed out of hand. Where the student is thought of as a user and brought into the process of designing courses, the prospects for student engagement, learning, persistence, and success are substantial.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Trajectories

My description and analysis of my experience in this pilot course outlined in this chapter suggests that a UX approach is useful for thinking through every level of course design and delivery. Neither of these exercises was remotely close to a full-fledged "usability test" or "user experience" analysis. Instructors looking to include these kinds of activities should certainly formalize the process further, taking a more structured approach to testing discrete elements.

In the Fall 2019 version of the class, I provided students with a much more structured form to guide their test of the syllabus' usability, assigning different roles to group members and narrowing the tasks they had to complete (see Appendix B). The assignment remained a challenging icebreaker to implement in the first

1. Both Mason and Emily, whom I also quote below, were kind enough to grant me explicit permission to quote their responses to this activity as well as to use their names in this publication. I am grateful to them as well as the rest of their colleagues in the Fall 2018 section of ENGL 2312 at TTU for being such thoughtful, serious, critical, and yet joyful good sports as we worked our way through a very challenging topic.

week. Completing five separate tests in a somewhat crowded room with two students joining the class online via video conference made the process that much more complicated. But it appears to have still gotten students thinking about a syllabus as part of their experience as students-as-users in a similar way to the Fall 2018 cohort. It allowed me again to model revision and to highlight centering users' needs as a key practice in UX analysis and research.

I also revised the Blackboard design activity assignment. Again, I provided students with a more structured form for completing the activity and narrowed the required task for suggesting a redesigned LMS interface (see Appendix C). I also asked them more directly to compare their experience as Blackboard users with their experiences with other sites they use, perhaps for different purposes (see question four in Appendix C).

Instructors can no doubt develop different and better ways to design or incorporate these kinds of activities. However, my experience pressed me to refine my thinking overall about students as individuals to work *with* as opposed to *on*. Thinking of students as course "users" has the potential to serve as another path away from the deficit model of student needs and capacities.

From an assessment perspective, thinking of students as users of course content and tools was an effective way to test their prior knowledge while disclosing (to both the instructor and students themselves) their tacit understanding of the course topic *and* tracking learning over the course of a semester. It has the ability to help clarify why a student might not be succeeding. Rather than simply assuming the problem is cognitive—"they just don't get it"—or a moral deficiency, e.g., "laziness," it frames and tracks learning relative to potential difficulty using the course architecture. That said, it is another way instructors can build accountability for students who will have participated in and, therefore, ideally taken responsibility for, the design of key class elements (Shivers-McNair et al., 2018).

Finally, this framing of students as users who need to be included early and often in the process may also help instructors meet accessibility needs (broadly defined). It can enable instructors to organize content delivery in ways that are flexible enough to meet diverse students' needs (Borgman & Dockter, 2018). It might also prove a useful way to test a course's content and tools for accessibility throughout a semester/quarter.

The pilot nature of the course was also somewhat freeing, enabling me to take what, to me, felt like risks in how I approached the topic and course structure precisely because the course had yet to be deployed in this particular configuration before. This enabled me to connect Still and Crane's (2016) commandment to involve users in design early to my students' potential experience in my class. I was already comfortable thinking of *myself* as a user, especially of Blackboard's interface and as a course designer. I knew experientially the iterative dynamics inherent to course design and improvement. Indeed, every instructor of any skill level engages in a kind of elongated user experience assessment of their classes when they develop course goals and track students' engagement, points of confu-

sion, successes, and failures in any given lecture, assignment, or discussion.

But what thinking of students as users reveals is that in the hurly-burly of day-to-day instruction, we may not always or explicitly think of students as users who need to be engaged early and iteratively in course design—regardless of a course's status as a "pilot" or "established" course. It reveals that we should aim to connect the discrete usability (or lack thereof) of a course and its elements to the larger architecture of their user *experience*, including the contextual differences we might think of as "cultural."

Inviting student input on course element design no doubt renders one vulnerable. To show up on day one of a course expecting to be able to teach the class only after you've had substantial input on how students will or will not be able to "use" its organization and environment may feel like risking one's identity as a teacher. And to be clear, it is not a risk equally available to everyone, knowing what we do about the ways in which instructors' subject positions shape their reception by students who interpret the same things differently (Boring, 2017; see also "Being a Black Academic in America," 2019).

Given several of my students' responses to being engaged in this way about the very design of the course texts/technologies, it makes sense that we test the impact of taking this stance towards students, i.e., as users, first on student success—both as a matter of depth and breadth. We might also test the impact of this approach on student retention at a school, in a major, or in a course sequence. It also seems wise, given the pitfalls I noted above around instructor subjectivities and the impact they may have on student perceptions, to test the impact of this approach on semester course evaluations and student perceptions of instructor competence *before* using these attempts as grounds for assessing instructors.

Furthermore, institutional structures are not always conducive to applying Still and Crane's (2016) first and second commandments of UCD. The historically determined commitments to course design and delivery demand courses be fully planned and deployable at the outset. The user experience, in other words, is expected to be fully formed and used immediately. This is especially true for courses delivered 100 percent online—particularly asynchronously. Institutional and even student expectations are such that everyone shows up to class on day one "ready to go."[2]

2. I have attempted to build this same conceptual perspective into my 100 percent asynchronous course sections. While the course design still has to be completed prior to the start of a term, I have included a designated "usability/UX discussion board" in the LMS. Students can—for extra credit—post insights about what is or is not working in their navigating the course site, content, and requirements from a user's perspective. In order to receive full extra credit, I ask that they complete all assigned work and post three times: once at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. Students in two separate sections over the two separate semesters in which I have adopted this assignment have spontaneously expressed the same kind of pleased surprise that Mason did at being included in thinking through how the course is designed and organized.

Regarding digital learning environments, Blackboard no doubt has user-tested the LMS with faculty and students in context as part of the product's proprietary development and iterative redesign. But if students are in fact enculturated users (Crane, 2015; Sun, 2012), then their diverse, ever-changing contexts of use are a crucial component of their capacity to engage the experience architecture of a course, be it the LMS, syllabus, or instruction sets. Lab-testing a product's use can only take designers and instructors so far. Every class will be unique to some extent.

Given the rapid proliferation and customization of so much content delivery outside the university, there's also little reason to believe our capacities to replicate Fordist models of course delivery and quality control inside the university will do anything but grow weaker without more flexible models of student engagement. Of course, there's no guarantee that UCD approaches themselves will be able to move beyond the more apolitical, individualist thinking regarding student engagement that leads Collin Bjork (2018) to propose we supplement usability-type approaches with insights from digital rhetoric, identifying the inherently rhetorical dynamics at work in any user interface, such as audience, persuasion, and credibility.

Yet my hope is that this chapter connects with those instructors interested in taking a user-centered approach to the design and deployment of their courses and their pedagogical practices more broadly, especially in those courses that have a significant intercultural, cross-cultural, or multicultural component. My work here seeks to extend insights gained by traditional student-centered pedagogies, usability and UX studies generally, and those who have already begun to apply usability and UX approaches to writing studies—especially online writing instruction (Bjork, 2018; Borgman & Dockter, 2018; Crane, 2015; Greer & Harris, 2018; Shivers-McNair et al., 2018).

Writing studies, technical communication studies, and UX studies are well positioned to adopt and extend this thinking and, in many ways, already have. Each already recognizes the constitutive role of revision and audience in composing anything, whether that is writing an essay, crafting an instruction set, or designing a web interface. Further turning our content knowledge and the process insights of our field to see students themselves as users with potential insight into the class they are taking may grow our capacity to engage a more diverse group of students in a wider range of topics and environments.

Any instructor could theoretically, at this moment, start thinking of their students as "users" at the center of and in their course. However, instructors might object to how much time this process of engaging students as users takes if it does not also directly advance toward course goals and outcomes. This is a valid concern, especially for instructors in tightly integrated sequence courses with a lot of content to cover to prepare students for their next course. Exploring ways to fold the process into the content of the course in the ways I was provisionally able to do might head off complaints that it takes away from content instruction.

Hopefully my own foray into this pedagogical framing will encourage others, even those new to thinking of students as users, to begin incorporating it into their teaching processes, their syllabus design, term planning, and daily activity development. Instructors with this mindset will be a critical part of supporting and advocating for the broader institutional and disciplinary shifts called for by the editors and authors of this volume.

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Appendix A: ENGL 2312 Activity Reflection Questions

Save copy for your records: Last_name_ENGL2312_Activity Reflection_1

Activity:

Date of Activity:

Respond to the following questions for any activity conducted in class (or smaller activity conducted outside of a course in a given week). Answers need not be long, but need to show serious, genuine, honest, and thoughtful engagement with the texts.

1. Briefly summarize your experience doing the activity.
2. How do you think the activity connected with our course topic, readings, other activities (either completed or yet to come)?
3. What is the most interesting/important part of the experience for you? Why did this part seem interesting or important to you? Provide specific example(s).
4. What is something that confused you about the activity? Is there something you still don't understand having completed the activity?
5. What is something you can do to clear up any confusion you still have? Provide specific example(s).

Upload copy to course LMS (e.g., Blackboard). Retain a copy for your records.

Appendix B: Revised Syllabus Design Activity (Fall 2019)

Syllabus "user test"

Date: _____

Student user name: _____

Observer name: _____

Role [check only one]:

____ Administrator/observer

____ Time keeper/observer

____ External observer

Syllabus format (circle all that apply): Single-sided/double sided, loose/stapled, digital copy

Task 1: Identify **2 ways** to contact your instructor if you have questions/issues

Successful? Y/N Time to completion: _____

TAP notes:

Task 2: Identify what **books, other readings/materials** are needed for this course

Successful? **Y/N** Time to completion: _____

TAP notes:

Task 3: *Identify when the* Final group presentations *are due*

Successful? **Y/N** Time to completion: _____

TAP notes:

Task 4: *Identify* **whether or not** *you can turn in assignments* **late** in this class

Successful? **Y/N** Time to completion: _____

TAP notes:

Task 5: Identify what it takes to get a **"B"** in this course

Successful? **Y/N** Time to completion: _____

TAP notes:

Appendix C: Revised Blackboard Design Activity (Fall 2019)

Date: _____

Student name: _____

1. Have you used Blackboard before in other classes? (If answer is "no" go to question #2.)
2. How have instructors used Blackboard in classes before? What kinds of things have you had to do on Blackboard as a student?
   a. What worked/was easy to use/did you like using Blackboard to do in classes?
   b. What didn't work/wasn't easy to use/you didn't like using Blackboard previously? Why?
3. Have you used learning management systems (LMS) other than Blackboard? What system did you use: _____ (If answer is "no" go to #3 below.)
   a. What worked/was easy to use/did you like using _____ to do in classes?
   b. What didn't work/wasn't easy to use/you didn't like using _____ previously? Why?
4. Draw an "ideal pathway" from a course homepage to submitting our first major assignment (e.g., LRSA). How would you get from the home page to submitting the assignment? What links, tools, information, etc. would you want to have available/see? Be creative!
5. Compare the purpose of Blackboard to one other site/app you use reg-

ularly. How do those differences/similarities in purpose impact the interface design? The way you think about either? The way you use them? (Example: Blackboard cp. to Snapchat):