

Organizing Your Course to Facilitate Student Learning

<https://ctl.yale.edu/OrganizingYourCourse>

Well-organized courses encourage student motivation, performance, and persistence. Instructors can design their courses in many ways to cultivate student motivation and enhance opportunities for effective learning. *When a course is designed so that the learning goals align with activities and assessments*, it can help students develop conceptual awareness, learn to synthesize ideas, and begin constructing their own knowledge (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). The following strategies will help improve teaching and learning in your courses.

Enrich Learning Today

- **Open with Intrigue** – Instructors might consider opening lessons with a provocative question, an interesting demonstration, or a problem related to forthcoming content. This approach will hook student interest, get them thinking critically from the start, and help them *connect* previous learning to new ideas.
- **Provide a Roadmap** – After engaging with students, instructors can provide an overview of the day’s lesson. Students appreciate having a sense of direction and knowing how ideas emerge and connect. Because students learn by *connecting* new knowledge with previous knowledge, a roadmap can help facilitate their learning. (e.g., provide learning outcomes; session agendas).
- **Summarize Key Themes** – Like providing a roadmap, instructors can also ask students to summarize key content, individually or in groups. Instructors might also forecast future content, in order to draw out connections among major class themes. This practice helps students improve recall, grasp major content, and practice owning their knowledge.
 - ▶ *Consider other small but effective ways to innovate at the beginning and end of class.*
- **Change up the Room** – The physical layout of a room may impact how students think about content and interact with others. Given the opportunity, instructors can consider *various seating arrangements* like the horseshoe or group pods that naturally stoke discussion and collaboration among learners. Switching up the seating can refresh student focus and encourage different modes of thought.
- **Think-Pair-Share** – As a way to quickly reinforce ideas or get students thinking during a lesson, instructors can ask students to: 1) ponder a question or problem for a few minutes, perhaps with free writing, then 2) turn to a partner, share their ideas, and discuss, and finally 3) share the results of their discussion with the class. In less than 10 minutes, students think critically and analyze course content.
- **Offer Low-Stakes Assessment:** Students appreciate opportunities to check in on their learning progress, especially when those check-ins do not impact their grade. Some brief *formative assessments*, like clicker questions, 1-minute reflection writing, or in-class discussion can help instructors gauge student progress while reinforcing key concepts.

- **Cultivate Reflection** – Because people learn by *making connections* between known knowledge and new ideas, moments of reflection and big- picture thinking can give students time and opportunity to organize their knowledge into meaningful structures. Instructors might remind students of the broader arc a course is exploring, and then ask students to reflect (through practices like 1-minute papers, think-pair-share, or freewriting) on how major ideas they have learned fit within that arc.

Organizing Your Course (also see **Alternative Approaches**)

- **Course Goals** - When designing a course, instructors may start by asking, “What do I want students to be able to know and / or do by the end of the semester?” or, more broadly, “How do I want my students to be different or think differently as a result of this learning experience?” Writing *effective learning outcomes* can be a powerful first step when framing the goals of a course.
- **Course Activities** - Equipped with specific and measurable outcomes for learning, instructors might next ask, “What kinds of activities and assignments will best engage my students and help them meet course goals?” A variety of *teaching strategies*, including *effective lecturing* and *active learning*, can help students make progress towards goals for learning.
- **Course Assessment** - With goals and lesson ideas in place, instructors can also ask, “How will I determine if students are progressing towards my goals and gaining the most they can from content and activities?” *Formative and summative assessment* (during the course and at the end of the course, respectively) can help instructors gauge the pace of student learning.
 - ▶ *Instructors are familiar with the perennial challenge of “fitting everything into the syllabus.” The idea behind starting with goals – beginning at the end – is called “Backwards Design,” and helps to construct a cohesive, well-paced course from Day 1.*
- **Course Syllabus** – Once an instructor has established activities and assessments that work together to meet course goals (a principle called “alignment”), they can assemble everything into a syllabus. The syllabus can be an effective tool for helping students approach their learning, especially when instructors take time to discuss it in class.
- **Course Meeting Space** – Instructors at Yale have exciting opportunities to convene with students in flexible learning spaces. *Active Learning Classrooms* like the *TEAL* and *CTL classroom spaces* can facilitate teaching practices and learning activities that might otherwise be restricted by fixed- and stadium-style seating.

Facilitating Students' Skill and Knowledge Development

- **Understanding Student Minds** – Ongoing research in the cognitive, educational, and sociological sciences continues to reveal that students – and all people – tend to construct knowledge and develop their learning in specific, predictable ways. Understanding how people learn can help instructors design teaching approaches that meet students where they are and motivate their confidence and desire to grow.
 - ▶ *Instructors can also learn more about students and win their confidence by asking them how the class is going. A midterm student course evaluation invites students to help mold class structure and share their honest thoughts.*
- **Diversity and Inclusion** – When preparing to welcome students with a variety of life experiences, identities, and backgrounds, instructors can make sure to design an inclusive classroom climate and develop inclusive teaching strategies to ensure that all students are welcomed and empowered to interact.

References

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