Learner-Centered Course Design

Instructional Strategies for ALL Learners

Students with a Learning Disability (LD) often struggle with Executive Functions - those cognitive processes many of us have honed to perfection according to our own learning preferences and needs. So refined are our executive functions, we are often unaware of employing them as we set out to learn and accomplish the tasks before us.

For some learners however, the ability to prioritize work, arrange notes and materials in a logical and organized fashion, identify tasks to be completed, and create a timeline for achieving these tasks by stipulated due dates, are skills that are not fully developed or that must be actively and consciously worked. Processes like this require significantly more time and energy for such individuals -- often requiring more effort than instructors are able to predict -- and often resulting in decreased academic success.

Designing a course that will support the success of all students, whether they have a learning disability or not, is a critical undertaking. While University sanctioned accommodations are implemented as appropriate to support the learning of those students with documented disabilities, it is also important to consider the rest of our students, many of whom who have an undisclosed or undiagnosed disability (for which accommodations are not provided) as well as those learners without a disability that are struggling to mastering our content.

Keep these easy-to-achieve principles in mind as you create a learning environment that supports the success of all learners:

Provide a Detailed Course Map
Sharing an overview of learning activities, due dates, point distributions, and weekly task reminders is beneficial to all students. Creating a table of weekly topics, readings, and “to do” items provides students with an organized and easy-to-read outline to quickly obtain this information and refer to as needed. In the same manner, a point distribution table and grading scale also provide detailed information at a glance.

KISS Principle - Keep It Simple & Straightforward
Many students, especially those with a LD, can often be easily distracted. Keeping extraneous images or graphics to a minimum inside your course will afford students more cognition to remain focused. In the same manner, overemphasizing content through excessive bolding, varying font colors, and highlighting all can be a distraction to students with a LD and those with visual impairments. If emphasis is needed, use it sparingly so that the reader’s attention is drawn to it.

Summarize and Bulletize
A well-organized course helps learners stay on top of tasks and maintain clear mental focus. LD learners have difficulty filtering out content that is not relevant to their learning goals and objectives - particularly if they aren’t sure of course expectations or desired outcomes. Provide a brief summary that outlines key takeaways, clarifies what the course entails, and communicates what students are expected to learn. Placing detailed or lengthy information into a bullet list will help ensure students understand and comprehend each step in the process along with desired expectations.

Be Clear & Concise
In conjunction with the above two design principles, ensuring information is presented in a clear, concise manner helps all students assimilate and comprehend the content. Ensuring clarity and providing concise instructions eliminates potential ambiguity and misinterpretation, while also clearly defining tasks and expectations. Using consistent naming conventions for assignments, files, and content throughout the course will also help to lessen the cognitive demands on students, allowing more focus to be placed on the course activities, and therefore, on the learning.
Break High-Stakes Learning Activities into Smaller Tasks
Students with an LD may struggle with high workload volume; therefore, building feedback opportunities into a learning activity is a great strategy. Not only to ensure a polished final project that meets expectations, especially when the work accounts for a large portion of final grade, but also recognizes students for hard work along the way. Breaking down a larger project into smaller learning activities supports the motivation and recognition LD students may need to remain focused and on task.

Variety is the Spice of Life
Students who struggle with the ability to remain focused for periods of time, those who require longer processing time, and those with reading comprehension challenges are examples of learners who may not always be the best test-takers and may find timed assessments a challenging means for demonstrating knowledge gained. A variety of graded learning activities throughout a course allows a student’s final grade to represent an assortment of items and affords different opportunities to showcase what has been learned.

Caution! Processing Time Needed
LD learners may require longer processing time to assimilate content and to complete required tasks. A high quantity of “to do” items in a given module equates to a longer amount of time LD students must set aside in order to meet these requirements. Thus, emphasis should be on the quality of work completed, not on the number of tasks one can achieve in a given module. Be cognizant of the depth of processing time needed to understand content being presented, and, remember: students with disabilities may need even more time than usual!

Resources for Courses
Students may require varying levels of support, depending upon their individual needs. Including self-help resources in course shells allows students to learn independently and still be successful. A great number of resources exist for students through CMU’s Writing Center, Math Assistance Center, Presentation Skills Center, Student Disability Services, and Librarians. Consider adding instructor-created resources to the course in the form of study guides, practice quizzes, or key terms. Reach out to the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Support (CIS) if you feel additional resources are needed but you are not certain of where to find them – CIS also curates collections of resource items!

Keep in Mind
As you design your course, remember students have varying levels of comfort and confidence in advocating for themselves; they may not always fully grasp how their disability impacts their learning, and, often, students will look to the instructor for support and suggestions. Keeping this in mind, if a course reflects the design principles above, it is more likely that instructors teaching the course you developed in the future will have the tools needed for success.

Need Help?
If you would like to act on these design principles in your Blackboard course shell but are uncertain how to proceed, the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Support can help! Submit a CoursePro ticket to request help.

Materials adapted from:

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