

## ***Best Practices in Using Etudes Tools***

### **IMPORTANT CAVEATS:**

- Make sure all computers you use have their browser settings set according to the Gateway.
- Don't use the browser's "Back" button.
- Be careful if working with two browser windows or tabs open at the same time to your course site. You could possibly overwrite your own work and end up losing content.
- Always wait for pages to load fully before attempting to fill in or click on anything.
- Get in the habit of using good filenaming conventions for your files. This means use filenames that are as short as possible, do not contain any spaces, and only contain alphanumeric characters and/or an underline or hyphen. The file should also have an extension (suffix) that truly represents the program that type of file is associated with (.doc if it is a Word file, .gif or .jpg if it is an image file). The filename extension is automatically handled by the program in most cases. Many places in which you may upload a file will require this filenaming protocol.
- Never change your own status to "inactive" or make your role anything other than "instructor". This is done through Site Info. Doing either of these things will lock you out of administration of your course.
- Removal of students from your course should take place through Banner. Once students are dropped from your Banner roster, they will no longer be able to access your course.
- Because you are working in a content editing program, some windows provide an open two-way communication between you and the software. These windows require that you complete the process before moving on. Be sure and properly exit out of windows. These will be distinguished by buttons usually at the bottom, such as "save", "done", "finish" or "cancel." Select the proper button to exit these windows.
- Edit (reduce file size and pixel size) and save images in an image editor before placing in your course. Try to keep pixel size no larger than 400w x 420h, and file size as small as possible while still maintaining enough clarity for use (For reference a 50 KB picture on average will take 10 seconds to download over dial-up).

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS TOOL:**

- For whole-class communication from instructor.
- A "Welcome" announcement is a good way to greet students and get them used to looking in this section for important information. In this welcome message, it is often helpful to include a list of things students must do now that they are in the class site.
- When posting new announcement a tip to make them noticeable is to vary the font style, size, color, or background color from one announcement to the next.
- Do not overuse announcements with trivial information or students may be likely to ignore it—The "cry wolf syndrome."
- Let your students know, in the syllabus, that you will be placing important information in Announcements and that they are responsible for reading all the announcements.
- Announcements can be simultaneously posted and sent to students emails at the same time, providing more visibility.

## **ASSIGNMENTS TOOL**

- This tool will be retired before too long, so we recommend that instructors transition assignments to the Tasks, Tests and Surveys tool as soon as possible.

## **CHAT TOOL:**

- If you are using the Chat tool in your course you may want to post a chat message yourself, before class starts with an explanation of what you will be using the Chat tool for in your class. Here is an example: "Hello! This is a real-time chat room... a space for you to chit-chat if you happen to be logged on at the same time. This is NOT the place to ask questions of the instructor. Please post them in the discussion area, under Course Questions. Thanks!"
- Instructors can encourage students to use the chat area for either casual conversation or for scheduled group chats. Remind students, though, that chats are not private, exclusive, or transitory. Anyone can enter a chat at any time and read past conversations.
- The chat area can be used for non-personal office hours. In other words, again remind students that what is said in chat is not private, but if they want to discuss anything with you in a public forum you will be in the chat room on x-days from y-hour to z-hour.
- Chats (using anyone's tool) are difficult to manage when there are a large number of users on at the same time. For this reason, I would not recommend holding whole class chats (unless you have a very small class). Instead, if you require a chat session I recommend breaking them into separate chat sessions (no more than 7 students at one time).

## **DISCUSSION TOOL:**

- If you will be requiring discussion participation in your course, it is recommended that your first discussion assignment be low-stakes and low-stress to allow students a chance to become comfortable with using the tool. An opening assignment, like an introduction, where students give a short introduction of themselves is standard. If you want to be more creative, you can, but again don't make the first assignment too complex. To add creativity you might have them describe themselves with a list of words beginning with the letters in their name. Or give a list of things you want them to tell about themselves and make it fun. It's always a good idea for you to go first to model what you want them to do.
- The grading features of the Discussion tool are very powerful and quite easy to use, but you must make sure when setting up your discussions that you have set up your grading correctly. Are you wanting one grade for all posts in a forum? If so, you'll choose the grade-by-forum method. If you will have a number of topics within a forum that will get individual grades then you will want to grade-by-topic.
- Let students know what you require and how you will grade discussions (min. and max. words, spelling & grammar yes or no, substance not length, etc.). You can even post these rules as a discussion topic and ask for student feedback. This kind of empowerment is motivating to many students.
- You may want to require that students reply to others on some discussions. This will make it more like a true discussion and of course help students extend their learning. If you do require replies, you want to set firm deadlines for the first original posting and then for the follow-up replies.

- You may want to include a “Course Questions” forum where students can ask non-personal questions related to the course. Suggest to other students that they can answer their classmate's questions if they know the answer (of course you want to monitor this to make sure their answers aren't erroneous). If you do use this, be sure and check this area frequently so you can respond in a timely manner to a question that many students might have. Using the forums in this way will help to reduce your overall workload, because you will answer one question to everyone (theoretically). Also make sure you instruct students to check to see if their question has already been asked before posting.
- Instruct students to use the “Quote” button if they are replying to a specific aspect of another message and not to the entire message, or if they are replying to a message that is not the last one in the list.
- There is a Student Guide for Using the Discussion and PM Tool that you can include as a module in your course, or you can point students to this guide off the Porterville College Online Courses website.

### **PRIVATE MESSAGES:**

- Keeps communication (even private communication) within the course site and there are no excuses for student not getting it (e.g. spam blocked or email box full).
- Keeps a record of course communication within the course itself, improving your course records organization.
- If you use this feature, you must be sure that you instruct your students to check their private messages every time they login to the course.
- You must also be sure and check your private messages every time you login (if you have told students that they can contact you through this tool).
- You can also set it to notify you by email when you receive a PM (under My Profile).

### **HOME PAGE OPTIONS:**

- Be careful if directing the Worksite Info box to a Web page because many will not display well in this small box. Also, some Web pages will break out of the frames and take you and students out of the course. There is no way to identify these types of Web pages ahead of time.
- You can always design your own Web page to fit into the box, if you are so inclined. The benefit here over just typing in information is that you can format the text, add urls, pictures and other more elaborate features.
- If you are using announcements and/or chats in your course you will have boxes for them on the right. You may change options for the display of the recent announcements and chats on your home page. You should choose the best options for your class and students. I like to show the entire announcement body, since I feel my announcements are something I don't want students to miss.

### **MODULES:**

- There are two editors you can choose to use for developing your modules. You can change your preferred editor at any time. Click the "Preferences" link at the top of the Modules home page to select your preferred editor. Sometimes one is easier to use for certain tasks and vice-versa.
- Using the built in editor as opposed to attaching a file overcomes some possible trouble areas for students: (1) Compatibility issues if the student does not have the proper

program to open the file you have attached or they are on a different platform than the one the document was created on, say Mac vs. PC. (2) Security settings and/or popup blocking may prevent students from being able to open files. (3) Bandwidth issues- files take time to download. The editor creates Web pages which load very quickly by comparison. (4) Continuity issues- When the student must use a separate program to view the attached file they are taken out of the course site thus upsetting the continuity that is maintained when they are kept in the course site by viewing the Web page created with the editor and kept within the course.

- Include supplemental handouts within a module section if it is relevant to that section. This may be better than placing it in Resources where students are taken out of the context in which it relates. Also, when you transfer your course to the next term all items attached to modules will transfer but ones linked via Resources will be broken.
- If copying and pasting your content from Word, make sure that you have the content exactly as you want it in Word before pasting. Editing content in the Module editor after pasting from Word, can sometimes have unexpected results, since there will be traces of Word code that you won't see messing with your formatting.
- When copying and pasting from Word try Ctrl+V first for the pasting action. To preview you should save and then finish, then view as a student. If the results weren't what you wanted try using one of the Paste options under the Edit menu.

## **TASKS, TESTS & SURVEYS:**

- Always "test drive" your assessments before allowing students to take them, so you can catch and fix errors.
- Feedback settings for your test can be important. This tool grades true/false, multiple choice, matching, and fill-in-the-blank question types. It can't grade essay questions -- you'll have to do that. If your assessment includes questions that need to be graded by hand, you might prefer that your students not see the results of the automatically-graded portion until you've had a chance to finish the rest of the grading and you also wouldn't want the score going to the gradebook until you have completed the scoring.
- There is no difference between a test and an assignment, as far as the tool is concerned. You determine what constitutes something labeled as a test and something labeled as assignment. Those labels will simply place a specific icon next to that item. You can name your assignments and tests in any way you see fit.
- If you are giving a high-stakes exam to students and you don't want them to receive any feedback, at least not until everyone has turned in the exam, do this: 1) Under Publish scroll down to "Review Options" and check either "Never show review" or "Show after date" and then enter the date when you want to release the review information.  
AND  
2) Under Release Grades, set it to "Manual release" and do not check the "Send to gradebook" option.  
Students will get absolutely no feedback. THEN, after the due date has passed, you can go back into the Publish settings for the test and change the grading to send grades to the gradebook. This will help prevent students from sharing information.
- You may also want to use the timed testing feature, but offer a broad test availability window (at least 24 hours). If the test is timed, students won't be able to linger and discuss the questions with their friends.

- The other option for high-stakes exams is to use the Password feature and instruct students to take the test with a proctor, with whom you have given the Password for the exam.
- If you have quizzes in which you release the answers after a specific date, don't forget to change those dates when you are setting up a new semester! You must go into "publish" to change those dates. It's always a good idea to look over this list carefully, save, then test-drive first before publishing.

### **GRADEBOOK:**

- The Gradebook automatically receives grades entered via Tasks, Tests and Surveys as well as in gradeable discussions, if you have entered settings in those tools that tell it to send to the Gradebook. You can also add items manually to the gradebook.
- Remember that by checking the second box under "Grade Options" it will figure a course grade for students based upon all items that are currently being sent to the Gradebook. So if you have ungraded items but they are set to send to the Gradebook, they will be counted and it will be assumed the student received a zero for that item. In other words, at the beginning of the class students are starting with an F and working their way up. If you don't want this either uncheck that box, and only check it near the end of the term (students will still see their scores for every item as it is scored and sent to the gradebook). Or you can wait and send items to the gradebook as you enter their scores.
- The Gradebook only accepts percents for calculating the final score.
- When calculating a course grade, the student's cumulative average percentage is never rounded up. For example if a student gets 79.99% overall, and the limit for a B is 80%, that student will receive a C . . . not being rounded up hurts. You can override this by setting your percents accordingly. 79.5% would be the cutoff for a B and so on.
- There is no weighting in the gradebook. For weighting or other grade manipulation, export your scores from the Gradebook to Excel and adjust using Excel's formulas.

### **RESOURCES:**

- You might put handouts or links to URLs here that would be useful throughout the course as opposed to targeted resources that are only useful for a specific topic covered in the course. The latter would be more useful if placed in the module section in which that topic is covered.
- Resources placed in the course can be accessed by your students in that semester. Keep in mind that items in a course site Resources cannot be imported to a new site like you import everything else.
- Resources placed in My Workspace can only be accessed by you unless you mark them as Public which would allow you to make links to them within your course site.
- Placing your own personal resources in My Workspace and not making them public might be useful if you work on multiple computers. This way you could access that resource no matter what computer you were on.

### **MY WORKSPACE:**

- Most important to keep in mind that this is a space that is unique to you alone. Each person has a My Workspace area that displays information unique to them and the course sites in which they are members.

- Account- Go here to edit your name, email address or password (does not affect your account on Banner)
- Preferences- Go here to change how activity notifications are handled for you. If you click on "Customize Tabs" you can change the order of the course site tabs and also hide some tabs if you choose to do that.
- The announcements in MW are ones that are merged from all your sites (you can only read announcements in MW).
- The schedule in MW is merged from all your sites. You can create new items in your schedule from MW but they are items that will only be placed in your schedule here—these items will not go to your course's schedule.
- Resources that you place into MW can only be seen by you unless you choose Public.

### **ADDING TOOLS:**

- Best to keep the number of tools down to the smallest possible number.
- Do not get carried away with the link to outside Web sites. Only use this if it is crucial in your course that students have ready access to some outside resource.

### **ADDING GUESTS:**

- Do **not** add students manually to your course site. Students are added to your course through daily roster uploads from Banner.
- Guests would include people for whom you want to give access to your course (guest speakers, tutors, teaching assistants, observers, etc.) or to set up a fake student account for testing purposes.
- Keep in mind that although we are calling them guests, you can assign that person a number of roles including the role of student, faculty, or guest. The "guest" role can participate in chats and in discussions, and can see your syllabus.
- Be sure and select, "send email to user" when you get to that screen. Otherwise the person you added will not be given the password they need to login. Their username is always their complete email address.
- If you create a "test student" account be sure and give that account a proper label such as first name is "Test" last name is "Student", and do not put your name in those boxes. Doing so will cause your name to show up twice in the discussion tool of the course and students may send a PM to the wrong account causing you to miss important communication.