



TEACHING TUESDAYS



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BELLISARIO BULLETIN



By [Juliet Pinto](#) | Acting Associate Dean and Associate Professor

It's the last week of class before Thanksgiving break; wishing you a wonderful holiday. May we all recharge and enjoy this time with loved ones.

Today's Teaching Tip gives perspective on something those of us who teach large lecture courses have asked: "How can we better engage with our students?" Chris Ali shares how he connects with students in COMM 180, with efforts ranging from study sessions and team debates to coffee hours. I absolutely love this statement: "Office hours are for class; coffee hours are for life." Here's to that!

As the end of the semester nears, Danielle Harris offers a reminder on how to organize the gradebook in Canvas, including weighting final grades.

See you in December!

Important Items of Note

- **Canvas Course Archiving** | On November 18 & 19, courses [identified here](#) will be moved to long-term storage or deleted. Additionally, LionPATH courses offered prior to and including fall 2024 **and** non-LionPATH courses will be available to [opt-out](#) of the upcoming January archival.
- **Dreamery Speaker Series** | Designing Flexible Learning | December 3-4 | [More Info](#)
- **Free Public Lecture** | Christopher Ali, Pioneers Chair in the Bellisario College, will discuss his book, "Farm Fresh Broadband: The Politics of Rural Connectivity." | November 20 | 3:00 - 4:30 p.m. | [More Info](#)
- **Thanksgiving Holiday** | No Classes | November 24-28

Careers/Internships

- **November 18** | 7:30 - 9:00 p.m. | Composers and Filmmakers Meet and Greet | Multipurpose Room, Bellisario Media Center
- **November 19** | 6:00 - 7:00 p.m. | Cover Letter and Resume Workshop | Bob Martin | 165 Willard Building

Upcoming Events

- **November 19** | 9:30 - 11:00 a.m. | [Canvas: Integrating the OneDrive Learning Tool](#) | Virtual
- **November 20** | 3:00 - 4:30 p.m. | Free Public Lecture with Christopher Ali, Ph.D. | "Farm Fresh Broadband: The Politics of Rural Connectivity" | Sutliff Auditorium, Katz Building | [More Info](#)
- **November 25** | 12:00 - 1:00 p.m. | [Talking about Academic Accommodations](#) | Virtual

TEACHING TIP



Fostering Outside Conversations in Large Classes

By [Christopher Ali](#) | Pioneers Chair, Professor of Telecommunications



COMM 180 is a large class, with a roster ranging between 250 and 350 given the semester. Even though it is a required class for telecom majors, students often approach the class with considerable apprehension on two fronts: it seems "technical" (and therefore intimidating) and it seems "boring" (insert image of Chris clutching his pearls here).

To mitigate both concerns, the philosophy behind the class for my team – which comprises myself, graduate TAs and sometimes undergraduate TAs – is about presence and visibility. I aim to create as many touchpoints between our team and students as possible and this includes lots of office hours, study sessions, exam prep sessions, and, of course, coffee hour.

How do you foster outside conversations in large classes?

Outside conversations are difficult to come by in a large class without a formal discussion section. Last year, with the help of two amazing undergraduate TAs, we started doing exam preparation study sessions before each of the four exams outside of class meetings. These were incredibly successful in terms of engagement and attendance. Building off these, this year, my incredible graduate TAs (big shout out to Caroline and Chenchen!) run weekly study sessions in addition to exam prep sessions. These sessions have been well attended, especially, as you can imagine, when exams draw near. They allow another touchpoint for students and given them a chance to review materials and ask questions. The latter is particularly important because not everyone is comfortable asking a question during regular class time, and some students find talking with the professor intimidating (question to readers: *am I intimidating? Is it the bowties?*).

If you do social activities throughout the semester (rather than on just day one), are there certain ones that students react more favorably to than others?

When I came to Penn State now 3.5 years ago and inherited the responsibility of COMM 180, I immediately began "coffee hour with Professor Ali." This is a weekly event for current and former students of COMM 180 (and anybody in the college!) to join me for coffee and donuts in Carnegie 101 at noon on Wednesdays and talk about life. The only rule is: you can't ask me a question about class. Office hours are for class; coffee hours are for life. This has been a way for me to get to know our amazing students and for them to get to know me. It breaks down the barriers. In doing so, it serves a crucial pedagogical function because I find that students who come to coffee hour are more likely to also come to office hours and to ask questions in class. It builds rapport and it builds confidence ... it also builds my waistline, but that is a small price to pay (p.s. if you see me running a lot this winter, you know why... donuts are unforgiving and their presence at coffee hour taunts me unmercifully!)

Are some (or all) of these activities graded?

Last year, we offered bonus points for attending the study sessions. We opted not to this year, and I think we made the right call. Not everything needs to be graded.

What kind of subject matter for active learning tasks have you found to be the most engaging and effective?

When I was at the University of Virginia and taught a class of 100 – Media Policy & Law – the most successful active learning activity I found were stakeholder debates. I divided the class in ten different groups and assigned them all a stakeholder around a particular issue we were studying, like Net Neutrality. They had to come up with both talking points and rebuttal points and we had a full debate in class. I still haven't figured out how to bring these types of activities to a class of 300, but I'm working on it!

As the students get to know each other better, they may get chattier. How do you keep the class attentive when they are supposed to be quietly listening?

Alas, this has never been a problem in COMM 180. I think the size of the class is part of the reason why. At the end of the day, it remains a formal lecture class.

How do these efforts improve the overall experience for you and your students?

Going back to what I said at the beginning, many students approach the class with trepidation, worried simultaneously about technical language and ennui. At the end of the semester, however, they often come to me and say something like "I thought this class would be boring, but it turned out to be my favorite all semester!" These activities, coupled, I think with the energy that my teaching team and I bring to class and our student engagements, humanizes the subject matter and humanizes us. They connect the material to student's everyday life. It doesn't hurt that telecommunications change almost daily, which means there is always something new to talk about. For me, as the instructor, I can't think of a better way to spend 150 minutes a week. I get to stand before hundreds of students, channel my inner Brittany Spears, and talk about the subject matter and issues to which I have dedicated my professional life. It's a gift.

CANVAS CUE



Organize & Weight Final Grades with Assignment Groups

By [Danielle Harris](#) | Instructional Design

In Canvas, you can categorize learning activities into Assignment Groups, making the gradebook more consistent with what is described in your syllabus.

If you choose to **weight final grades based on assignment groups**, you can allocate a specific percentage of the final grade for the course to each group. For example, weekly assignments can account for 60% of students' final grade, discussions 10%, and the final project for 30%.

The screenshot displays the Canvas LMS interface for configuring assignment groups. On the left, a navigation sidebar includes 'Home', 'Syllabus', 'Announcements', 'Modules', 'Assignments' (highlighted with a red box), 'Grades', 'Library Resources', 'People', and 'Collaborations'. The main content area shows three assignment groups: 'Weekly Assignments', 'Discussions', and 'Final Project | Proof of Concept'. On the right, a dropdown menu is open, showing options: 'Edit Assignment Dates', 'Assignment Groups Weight' (checked), 'ALEKS Direct Link', 'Cengage', 'Hawkes Learning Deep Linking', 'W. W. Norton Deep Linking', and 'Commons Favorites'.

For more information on using the **Assignment Groups**, check out the following resources:

- [How do I add an assignment group in a course?](#)
- [How do I weight the final course grade based on assignment groups?](#)

SHARE A TEACHING STRATEGY



Share the phenomenal things that you have been doing in your classroom! Do you have a teaching technology or strategy that you've seen succeed and would like to share in the *Teaching Tuesdays* newsletter? If so, please [share your idea](#) for an upcoming issue.