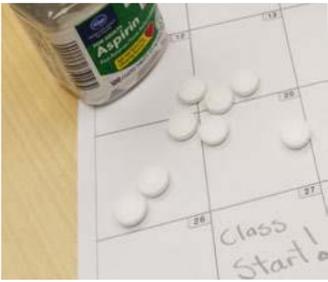# Housekeeping efforts that return time dividends

The first day of fall semester is next week! If you're teaching a UAF eLearning supported course, a place to start would be iTeachU where you can request to have your Blackboard course copied or stacked, access a checklist to guide you through course updates and more. This Teaching Tip will also share ideas on readying your course for opening day.

When you arrange to work with UAF eLearning to copy a previous course into a new one, you need to specify the source and the destination. This sets up the new course with almost everything the old one had with the exception of the class roster. This is handy, but you'll need to do just a little work to ready the course for students. You'll probably want to tidy up your announcements. Because it can be confusing for students to see messages from a previous semester's end, you'll at least want to make the old announcements unavailable. If you are prone to recycling certain messages in your class, you can always save the text somewhere or just leave the old announcements hiding, ready to sprout forth at the right time. Another method is to simply delete all the old announcements and start afresh.

Dates usually show up in two spots in your course: in your schedule and in your grade book. The clearest way to avoid questions of "When is this due?" is to have accurate deadlines. The semester dates from a previous year won't work. Another benefit of having due dates, published in your schedule and tied to your Learning Management System's (LMS) assignment mechanism, is that students can track their course grade progress and see upcoming assignments using features of the LMS.

If your course doesn't have any set meeting times, but is instead completely asynchronous, one of the things that can really help students out is to provide a visual tour of your course. You can record a screencast with the goal of answering things like: Where are the readings? How do I submit an assignment? How do I submit a discussion post? A screencast is a movie of action on a computer screen. It is well suited to explanations involving step by step procedures involving menus, buttons and other user interface elements. The good news about screencasts now is that you can create one using just your computer and an internet connection and resources that are available to anyone at the University of Alaska.

You can't foresee all of the possible questions students will have about the mechanics of your course, and you don't want to bloat your syllabus with attempts at providing all the answers. But you can offer help to all your students and add instructor presence. Many instructors set up a special discussion forum thread entitled something like "Questions the Syllabus Can't Answer". The purpose is to provide students an open area in which to get help. When I've used this in my classes, I encourage other students to help answer and I check for posts there at least once a day. The benefit of providing a class-wide response to certain questions, is that other students will benefit as well.

So, now you have a solid, well designed course with help at the ready. How do you know your students are actually getting engaging with the material? Enter the first contact assignment.

A first contact assignment is usually one in which students need to perform a quick task. The benefit of such a light assignment is that you can determine which students are able to follow and use your instructions and which students either have chosen not to engage, or who might be encountering technical problems. It's highly suggested that you assign the submission date of early contact assignments to be due within a couple of days of the start of the semester. If students are having a problem, you'll want to know as soon as possible. The staff at eLearning can also help you reach out to these students who might be having technical issues.

There's one more small, but vitally important task at the beginning of the semester which, if done properly, will also save you from having to correspond with individual students and staff at eLearning. At least by the first day of the semester, you must actually make your course available and open to students in your roster. If you need help with this or any of the other suggestions in this Teaching Tip, chat with an instructional designer during open lab.