Structure and Flexibility
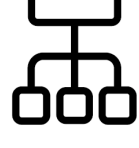
In Course Design

Balance of Structure and Flexibility

The principles of a trauma-aware class are safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. A practical way to satisfy these principles is to provide a balance of structure and flexibility. Structure (Tanner, 2013) is meant to minimize assumptions about students and provide transparency. Flexibility expresses trust for learners and prioritizes student agency. Like roots, structure provides a scaffold onto which all students can grow and gives them a path to navigate the course journey.
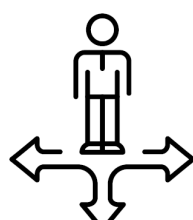
Structure

A clear, consistent structure from the beginning of the semester is an inclusive trauma-aware practice.

	Examples	Suggested Strategies	Where you can learn more…
Learning management system structure and organization	• Course chunked into modules with a clear pattern • Predictable deadlines	• Video course tour to navigate course structure • Regular due dates with a reasonable time of day (not midnight) entered into the course calendar	• ACUE Online Teaching Toolkit -Welcome Students (2020) • ACUE Online Teaching Toolkit - Organize Your Course (2020) • ACUE and Active Minds (2020)
Faculty-student communication	• Communication plan • Make efforts to get to know your students • Solicit anonymous student feedback • Structure office/student hours	• Clearly state the medium and time frame students can expect a response • Use an online form to ask students about themselves • Be explicit about what happens in office hours	• Kilgore (2016) • Pacansky-Brock sample student info form • Marx (2019) • Sathy (n.d.)
Student-content interaction	• Suggested structure of time spent out of class • Dedicated space for context and meaning • Accountability measures for interacting with course content	• Checklist of tasks to be completed every week • Hyperdoc as a template to contextualize course content • Reading quizzes, discussion boards, social annotation	• Flynn (2020) • Course workload estimator (n.d.) • HyperDocs (n.d.) • Angelo and Cross (1993)
Assessments and Activities	• Clear instructions and expectations • Prompt and timely feedback • Discussion of academic integrity	• Rubrics, authentic models • Staged, and structured group work • Video feedback, virtual drop in sessions • Co-create an honor code with students	• TILT (2020) • Eberly Center (n.d.) • Surrey Lab (2020) • UMSL CTL (2020)

Flexibility

Building in flexibility from the beginning of the semester signals to students that you trust them and that you value choice. As an added bonus it will help you minimize the number of case-by-case decisions you have to make during the semester thus resulting in a more equitable opportunity for all students (not all students will feel comfortable or know they can ask for flexibility).

	Examples	Suggested Strategies	Where you can learn more…
Course Policies	• Assignment deadlines • Examination Policies • Attendance policies	• Two-day guilt-free extension. Past that date devise a plan for submission • Drop lowest exam grade • Flexible engagement strategies in lieu of mandatory attendance	• Gannon (n.d.) • Carello (2020) • Weimer (2012)
Student Choice with Content	• Design activities once for multiple modalities • Give students choice of format with the same content • Students show learning through various means	• Students complete discussion on-ground, on Zoom or asynchronously • Video or text to achieve same learning objective • ePortfolio (podcast, artwork, written work, etc.)	• Eyler (2020) • Tobin and Behling (2020) • NILOA (2020)
Connection	• Informal means for student-student connection • Informal means for faculty-student connection	• Facilitate the formation of a WhatsApp peer group or encourage finding a critical buddy • Informal videos that highlight faculty as human beings	• Imad (2020) • Costa (2020)

Where you can learn more….

While all strategies listed above are grounded in evidenced-based practices the references and links below are are practical guides or articles that aid in the implementation of these strategies.

Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers (2nd Ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

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