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Designing an Effective Announcement Page for an Online College Class

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The design of the announcement page within a blackboard online course has an impact on student's emotions, which in turn would have a direct effect on their overall agency within the class. Therefore, the online instructor needs to consider what design elements would best help the student to engage with the material of the online course. This article proposes that colour is an important element that must be given priority when an instructor is posting an announcement on the announcement page. Different colours have varied effects on a student's emotional responses to the messages: the student views text written in red as important and that text written in blue as communicating encouragement. Also, research shows that large font size and CAPS help to communicate what is important and that variety within the announcements is desired by the students. Conclusions regarding the design of the announcement page are offered with the intent that online instructors will take the information and start designing their announcement page to fit the needs of the students and the tone of the message being posted.

Keywords: digital humanities, interactive teaching, online courses

Whether a professor is a seasoned online instructor or a novice launching into the great unknown for the first time, the announcement page in an online class is an element within the design that needs to be addressed. The announcement page is presented as the first portal where the students arrive after logging into their online class. This feature is designed to provide the latest updates in the

class, and every student has immediate access to it because it is the first thing they see when they enter the online class (Bradford et al.). Every student enters their online classes with emotions regarding the course they are about to take. Some students will be confident in their ability to navigate the online course and complete the expected coursework, others will be nervous about the technological challenges they might face as well as their ability to master the material in an online setting. These emotions play a role in the student's perception of the course as well as his or her ability to experience agency and success within the online class (Berenson, Boyles, and Weaver). Since the message on the announcement page plays an important role in establishing a clear communication between the instructor and student, as well as eliciting a positive emotional response within the student, it should be a priority for the online instructor to determine what elements within the design of the announcement page should be incorporated in order to create a positive response from the students.

As an online instructor, we need to think back to the first impression we had when we first clicked on the link to an online class and the page that appeared was staring back at us. For some, that first impression happened years ago, and for others, it is a more recent experience. However, if we are honest, most of us felt a bit lost as we stared at the page before us, and for many of us, anxiety, fear, and hesitation were part of those emotions we experienced. Linda Cooper in her article, "Anatomy of an Online Course," encourages us to consider the online course from the student's perspective as we approach designing the messages to be posted. Some of your students might be veterans, but there is a good chance that a few of your students are using your course as a trial run, wondering if online education is an option for them. Either way, your course is being viewed for the first time with emotions playing a part in the assessment of what they are viewing. Berenson, Boyles, and Weaver establish in their research that the role of emotional intelligence that the student possesses is an element that contributes to the overall success that a student will experience in their online class. Emotional intelligence is a student's awareness of his or her own feelings and needs (Jerabek). Awareness is helpful, but often those feelings are hidden in a student's subconscious, yet those emotions still have an impact on the confidence level with which the student approaches the course (Berenson, Boyles, and Weaver). When we, as instructors, first encountered an online course, many of us would have appreciated a warm and welcoming note on the announcement page that was inviting us to read and helpful in its content; a note like that would have helped to feed into the positive emotions that we were experiencing as well as help to dispel our fears. Well, if we can see the value of what that announcement page would have done

for us, then we must certainly consider the role that it will play in our student's emotional response to the online class they are taking.

The most popular Learning Management system used within American higher learning is Blackboard. This system is a tool that provides instruction, communication and assessment, allowing the students to benefit from learning at a distance (Bradford et al.). Although there are many aspects of communication that can occur within Blackboard, this research will be examining the role of design within the communication tool called the Announcement page.

There are seven principles that have been cited for effective teaching, and the first principle is "Good practice encourages student-faculty contact" (Graham et al. n.p.). Often the first point of contact between faculty and the student is the announcement page in an online class. Graham et al. suggest that an instructor's responsibility is to make sure that the communication that happens between faculty and his or her students will reduce fear and build the students' confidence to effectively manage the course expectations. In the research of Fein and Logan, we see a common approach used by online instructors regarding the strategies and delivery methods for an online class, but when it comes to the announcement page, there is little to no advice offered regarding specifics within the design. Fein and Logan explain that "Announcements need to be posted somewhere for the students to see . . . [and] should be updated regularly" (53). However, that is the only advice offered regarding the announcement page. Fredrickson, Clark, and Hoehner confirm that a consistent and frequent use of the announcement page will increase the level of participation in the course by the students, which is an important goal in online instruction. Yet, we are still left wondering what is the best way to design the information that is placed on the announcement page in order to inspire a positive emotional response.

If considering the student's perspective when designing an online class is a best practice (Cooper), then it should be apparent that a good place to begin is to survey a group of students in order to discover what they like or dislike related to the design of the text on the announcement page. In order to gain the students' perspective, 103 students at Elizabeth City State University (ECSU) were surveyed. ECSU is an HBCU located in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. The students surveyed were participating in an English class where Blackboard was used to enhance the educational experience. The first section in the survey asked the students to identify their sex and race. Of the 103 students, 85 were African American (AA), 11 were white, and 7 fell into the racial category of "other." Of the 85 African American students, 43 were male and 42 were female. In the white category, 9 were male and 3 were female. Finally, in the other category, 4 were male and 3

were female. In the data that follows, there was a consistent response between the males and females, except for one element that will be noted in the report. Also, their overall responses to the survey questions did not vary between ethnicities, except a few minor points that will be highlighted in the report as well.

The following six questions on the survey asked the students to identify their preferences related to the design of text used on the announcement page on Blackboard. The first question asked them to identify if they noticed when an online instructor used different fonts, colours, or sizes on the announcement page and whether they liked it when the instructor did that. In the AA group, 92% noticed and liked it when variety was used. In the white group, 92% noticed and 67% liked it when variety was used. In the other group, 100% noticed and 86% liked the variety. It is noteworthy that of the 11 students who did not like the variety, 10 of them were male. So, the vast majority of the students surveyed noticed and appreciated when an online instructor used a variety of colours, fonts, and sizes on the announcement page.

Next, I asked the students to identify the emotional response they had when the colour red or the colour blue were used on the announcement page. Since colour can affect people emotionally as well as have an impact on their behaviour and cognition (Elliot and Maier), it is helpful for an online instructor to be aware that the colours he or she uses on the announcement page can elicit certain emotional responses from their students. This became more apparent when the survey responses were considered. In the AA group, 92% said that red communicated importance. Regarding the colour blue, 67% of this group said it conveyed encouragement and 22% said it communicated importance. The white group had 100% identify red with importance; whereas, 67% identified blue with encouragement and 25% connected blue with importance. Finally, the other group had 57% say red was connected with importance and 43% with anger. Then with blue, 57% said encouragement and 43% said importance. This study will not investigate the connection red has with anger for other minority students, but that would be an interesting point for further investigation. Of the four emotional responses offered: anger, importance, encouragement, fear, there were a few who indicated anger or fear, but it was a very low percentage except for the other group in relation to the colour red. However, the overall consensus is that red and blue communicate importance and encouragement respectively to the students who are viewing those colours being used as part of the design for a text.

Red and blue are two colours commonly used when an online instructor might veer from the traditional black text that is the default option when typing a message on the announcement page. Research has demonstrated that red is more

arousing and can create anxiety, but blue is more calming (Valdez and Mchra-bian). The students surveyed at ECSU support this general perception associated with these two colours when they attached importance to red (arousing) and encouragement to blue (calming). However, most systems provide other colour options than just red or blue, so it is important that the instructor is familiar with the typical emotional responses connected with each colour. Other colours that could be included in the creation of an announcement are orange, yellow, green, and purple. According to the website Color Psychology, orange communicates happiness, enthusiasm, and encouragement; yellow communicates cheerfulness and joy; Green suggests harmony, stability, and calmness; purple conveys wisdom and promotes ambition. So, the use of colour does play a role on the announcement page, and the emotions elicited by those colours are also significant to consider.

Colour is one way in which an online instructor can change the text on the announcement page, but there are also other options. Question four on the survey asked the students to identify their favourite design changes that they like to see implemented on the announcement page. The options provided were the following: large font, small font, colour, italics, variety, CAPS. The following chart summarises the results from the ECSU survey.

Group	Large font	Small font	Color	Italics	Variety	CAPS
AA	58%	0%	50%	0%	32%	34%
White	55%	0%	55%	0%	64%	0%
Other	0%	0%	71%	0%	29%	0%

Table One: ECSU students' preferences for design changes on the announcement page

The conclusions reached from the results gathered regarding question four on the survey is that overall, larger font with the use of varied colours is appreciated. Also, students value variety and some of the African American student body also place an importance on the use of CAPS.

The final two questions on the survey asked the students to select an option that reflected what they liked contained in the announcement and how often they wanted to see an announcement posted. Within question five, there were options that provided insight into the design of the text as well as the tone of the text. This element was incorporated to help confirm the students' previous answers related to design. The options provided in question five related to their preference regarding announcements are as follows:

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- lots of information
- outline of important details
- important details highlighted with font, size, or colour
- friendly approach
- formal approach

The next table summarises the results found from the survey given to the ECSU students.

Group	Lots of info.	Outline	Details highlighted	Friendly	Formal
AA	29%	64%	87%	50%	18%
White	18%	82%	82%	36%	27%
Other	14%	29%	71%	14%	43%

Table Two: ECSU students' preferences for certain elements to be included on the announcement page

The results listed above demonstrate that the overall strongest preference for the announcement page is having important details highlighted with font, size, or colour. The next most valued element is that the information provided be an outline of important details. Other observations include the African American community wanting a friendlier approach and the other minority students preferring a more formal approach.

The last question helps to clarify the frequency that is used for posting announcements. The results from the ECSU survey showed that over fifty percent of all students were content to have the professor post only when needed. Between 18-34% of the students wanted announcements posted before every class, and between 14-30% of the students were satisfied to have an announcement posted only once a week.

The conclusions reached from the overall findings of the ECSU survey can help to provide some guidelines for online instructors. The overall consensus is that the students notice when a professor makes changes to the text on the announcement page, and they like it when they see variety in the text. They see red as identifying something of importance, and they see blue as a colour of encouragement. Their first desire is to see colour added to the text as well as a variety of elements used, which can include font style, size, and CAPS, as seen with the students' indication that they appreciate when an online instructor highlights important details with varied fonts, sizes, and colours. Also, they are thankful when the announcement is an outline of important details. Finally, over half of the students

found it helpful when a professor posts an announcement only when it is needed. This final observation needs further research, but an initial hypothesis connected to their preference to have an announcement posted only when needed could be that when a new announcement appears, they know that needed information is in it, and with the use of varied font, sizes, and colors, that new and important information can be highlighted for them.

Making a good first impression is important face-to-face as well as online, and the announcement page of an online course is the page that makes the first impression. Based on the research offered in this article, it is no longer appropriate for the online instructor to just use the default text on the announcement page. Instead, the online instructor needs to consider the racial makeup of their class, the tone of the message they want to communicate, and the design that will best serve their purpose for the announcement they want to post. Our students are more than just a name on a class roster. They are individuals who come to the class with a range of emotions, and what an online instructor puts on the announcement page will have an impact on the emotions the students are feeling. So, it is time for online instructors to use the design tools available to them and start creating announcements that send the appropriate and desired message that will lead to positive emotional responses and greater student success.

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