

# WHERE'S My Stuff: Are Your Students Content with Your Content?

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## What's our challenge?

Designing content with intuitive modules and accessible topics using basic elements

## Session Goals

### 1—Join and explore the [Desire2Learn Community](#), dabbling in:

My Community Courses/Community Updates  
Documentation

### 2—Move from "handout central" to "learning environment"

Students should be able to:

- Find the content they need, where they expect to find it and when they need it
- Access the content using whatever adaptive tools necessary
- Interact with content rather than passively consuming it
- Explore customized added-value content
- Provide feedback to improve the experience for others

### 3—Experiment and share with colleagues:

- Learn through less than perfect results
- Use available feedback and reporting tools
- Practice the give to get philosophy—you give, you get

## Who are we?

**Karen** designs and teaches curriculum for an online nursing degree program with people from all across the US in different time zones. Instruction takes place in theory courses, lab courses and at times in the clinical setting. Staying in touch with the student in all these different settings can be a challenge in meeting their individual needs.

**Sherry** designs and teaches online developmental courses in reading and writing at the request of administrators and students, expanding the college's online presence, attractive to adult learners coming back to college or attending for the first time, courses also designed as contract for grade and self-paced, so not all content accessed at same time by students

## Why did we start exploring content design?

Flooded with phone calls and e-mails about content, leading to WHERE'S My Stuff:

**W**idgets (Quick Links, Calendars)

**H**omepages (What's most essential above the fold)

**E**ding Tools (Desire2Learn and Word Editing tools for Accessibility, PDF files, Embedding/Linking)

**R**elease Conditions and **R**eporting (What shows up when? How do you find out what works?)

**'S**omething Special (Interactive content using [YouTube](#), [Articulate](#), [SitePal](#))

## Getting Started

### 1—Widgets: How can I find what I need, fast?

#### What do I need to know about widgets to get started?

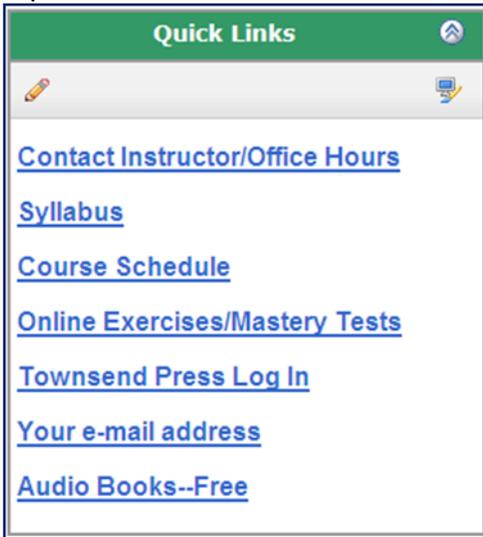
Widgets are boxes you can customize and place in different locations in your course. Before creating widgets, we suggest you create a custom homepage, so you'll have somewhere to put your widgets later. Normally, you can't add your customized widgets to the default homepage created by your site administrator.

You'll find widgets on the list of tools under **Edit Course**. To create a widget, select **Widgets** from the tools list and choose **New Widget**. As a tip, remember that **Widget Image** does not add an image to the widget; it just lets you choose an image as a thumbnail.

In addition to the **Properties** tab, you'll see three other tabs: **Customize**, **Release Conditions**, and **Content**. **Customize** allows you to change the appearance of the widget box, **Release Conditions** will allow you to control who will see the box and under what conditions if it's not going to be available all the time, and **Content** allows you to design the widget, using **Basic** or **Advanced** editing tools. Here's where you could embed a YouTube video, include graphics, add links to content items or course files, or provide basic contact information. You can preview the widget at any time in the design process.

Our widgets have evolved over time. Sherry experimented with a widget that included graphics and links to course files, organized in a table, but she abandoned the effort as too cluttered and too much of a problem for people using screen readers. (Tables should be for data, not for design purposes, in general.)

**Sherry** now uses a simple "Quick Link" widget with a custom color header and links to key content and course information for students, such as the syllabus, course schedule,



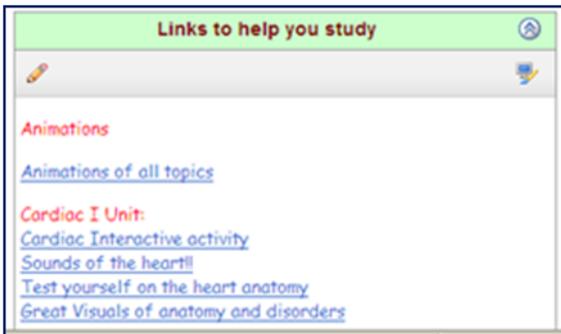
and contact information. Initially, course files were linked in the widget, but that proved to be a problem with tracking use, as the reporting feature only tracks items accessed through the content menu, not as course files. Changing to content-based links allowed for better tracking and more continuity, as students would see the file in the same format as they did when accessing content, with the content icons for printing being particularly important for adult learners in developmental courses. Links to course files

required that students remember to click on File and Print to print the content.

**Karen** uses widgets in a similar fashion. In the beginning, she used them with the same

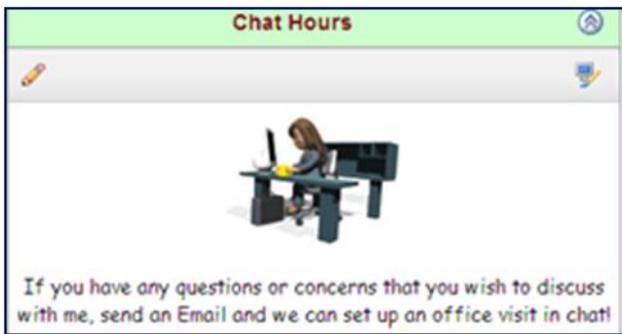
idea as linking them to key items within contents such as the syllabus and course calendars. She did attempt to use the pre-designed calendar widget, but received feedback from students that this was more confusing for them. This confusion could have resulted because no other former nursing instructors had used the tool and students

were unfamiliar with it. Nonetheless, they requested it be deleted. More recently Karen has been using widgets for posting office hours and hyperlinks to useful web sites. More specifically, widgets are used to provide links to the YouTube video's Karen has made for nursing skills. This is especially helpful to the online student. The link opens in a separate window so that it can be easily bookmarked by the student for future reference.



Karen also likes to use animated clip art and color in widgets, in contrast to the regular system widgets. She finds that it attracts the student's attention to the widget, although she is careful not to overload them with animation. For example, if there is animation in the widget, Karen does not include additional animation in the document to which it is linked.

One idea that Karen has been using recently is a widget for online office hours, held in



the chat area, typically in the evening. This is another option for distance students besides e-mail or the telephone, and they can often get immediate feedback. It would be similar to discussion, but the response is immediate and they can also ask additional questions and receive

clarification on assignments.

Karen has also included recordings in widgets and in News items. If the recording is something that will be used short-term, Karen suggests putting it in the News area. If it will be used throughout the semester, it could be placed in a widget. Store the recording in your course files, and link it from there using the advanced settings. Karen uses Audacity (a free download) for audio recording.

### Suggested Resources

From [Desire2Learn Community](#): **DESIRE2LEARN HOMEPAGES AND NAVIGATION BARS USER'S GUIDE** (pages 7-9, and remember to create a new personal home page to place your widget!).

From [CNET Downloads--Audacity 1.2.6](#) (a newer beta version is also available)

## 2—Homepages: What makes this course special?

### Above the Fold Philosophy

We try to follow an **Above the Fold** model whenever possible in our homepage and content screens. Newspaper publishers and web designers recognize the importance of prominence in attracting attention. Stories above the fold of a newspaper are much more likely to be read than those below, and information on a computer screen is more likely to attract attention and interest if the person viewing it does not have to scroll.

### What do I need to know about homepages to get started?

Find out how much flexibility you have to create custom home pages. We would suggest that you place as many of the same system widgets on your custom home page, perhaps in different locations, so there's some continuity from course to course and instructor to instructor. We were fortunate enough to have some space available on the right side of our course home page, so that is where we placed our widgets (after a disastrous experience on Sherry's part of placing the widget below the News widget in the center of the screen—no one scrolled down to see it).

You can create a custom homepage by selecting **Homepages** from the list of tools under **Edit Course**. Select New Homepage, where you'll see two tabs: **Properties** and **Content/Layout**. You can explore options for making your homepage a tool or URL, although that is not the focus of our session. As a tip, you may want to make a list of the system widgets you want to keep in your new home page, based on your current one. We kept the My Settings, News, and Updates widgets in their normal locations and added our widgets in the right panel. Based on our experience, we'd suggest avoiding custom widgets in the header or footer—places that are often ignored by students. You can also change the default width of any widget (system or custom) through the **Panel Sizes** option in **Content/Layout**. Once you've created your homepage, remember to go back the **Homepages** tool and select **Set** to make your new homepage the active page students will see.

**One suggestion for online students** is to include **system widgets** for resources they might not be able to access as easily as on-campus students, such as **library resources** and **technical support**.

### Suggested Resources

From [Desire2Learn Community](#): **DESIRE2LEARN HOMEPAGES AND NAVIGATION BARS USER'S GUIDE** (see pages 3-7, and remember to create a new home page if you want a place for your widgets later)

## 3—Editing Tools: How can I navigate through this content?

### What do I need to know about editing tools to get started?

We are using editing in its broadest sense, as in all the design decisions we make about how to create and present content in order to make it accessible to the widest range of possible users. Our focus is on two sets of tools: those available in **Desire2Learn** and those available in two popular word-processing packages: **Word 2007** and **Adobe Acrobat 9 Professional**.

### Desire2Learn Tools

**Creating Modules and Topics:** Before you start creating modules and adding topics, it might be useful to consider the following questions:

1. Do you want students to be able to access all the course content from the beginning of the semester?
2. Will students be working through the course at the same pace?
3. Will all students need to access the same content?

These options can be addressed by considering how students scroll through content.

### Collapsing Modules

If all the content will be available all semester, you may want to consider collapsing your modules to minimize the need to scroll. This could be by month or by type of



content (such as Course Information, Required Assignments, and Resources). You may also want to collapse content topics by creating a master document that contains links to other content, such as an Assignments document with links to other documents outlining specific assignments,

rather than creating a separate topic for each assignment.



### Vertical versus Horizontal Content Listings

Another way to minimize scrolling would be present the content horizontally rather than vertically, although our experience is that students prefer vertical listings. The default is vertical listing, but if you want to change, you can do this under the "Settings" option on the left side of the Content screen. Whatever you use, we suggest being consistent in whatever courses you design, to make navigation easier for students.



### Using Custom Calendars to Focus Attention

In helping the student navigate through the course, Karen makes her own calendars, originally using PowerPoint slides and more recently Google documents, creating the calendar and saving it as a PDF file that is later uploaded to the course. She creates a reading

assignment calendars as well as a “month at a glance” calendar available for the student’s use. The use of color on these items makes it easy for the student to read and understand.

### *Using Availability and Release Conditions*

If students are working through the course at the same pace, you can include as many modules and topics as you like and then create **Availability** or **Release Condition** options to control when the topics appear and for how long, to minimize scrolling (see section 4.1 for details). Students may feel overwhelmed when presented with the content all at once. For example, in Karen’s 4-credit Medical Surgical course, students need to complete 10 units. Rather than present all 10 units from the beginning of the semester, Karen opens and closes them throughout the semester. Karen includes reminders to students to download or print anything they want to keep from a unit before it closes, which has the added advantage of focusing their attention on the content even more. Of course if students forget to save information and later need it, Karen has had to spend time e-mailing the content to them individually, a downfall of this method, but she feels it helps students with accountability in their learning.

If you plan to customize content for students, such as specific content appearing based on previous grades on assignments (review material, flash card options), you may want to consider a combination of collapsing modules and topics along with availability or release condition

As a side note, release conditions can also be used to avoid overwhelming students in the grade book and quiz areas, with only current quizzes or graded items being available, to reduce anxiety. There are pro’s and con’s to this method. The guiding principle for Karen is to reduce the anxiety of the student, yet some students want to know from the beginning how much work will be involved through the semester so they can plan accordingly. These students are generally directed to the course schedule, which includes all the requirements.

### *Using HTML Editing for Accessibility*

Desire2Learn already builds in a number of features designed to make content accessible, such as the prompt to add a caption to an inserted graphic if it is content-related, or to mark it as simply decorative. One feature we were not using as well as we could have, however, in our initial Desire2Learn-created content was the **Format** option under the **Advanced** tab. We became aware of its usefulness as we created documents using styles in Microsoft® Word, particularly for navigation and ease of creating a table of contents or figures, for example. Using the paragraph and heading options (available for levels 1-6) improved the navigation and accessibility of our documents as well as focusing our attention on overall organization of documents. There are a wide range of design options for those intrepid enough to explore HTML source editing options available in Desire2Learn and through commercial editing programs like [SoftChalk®](#).

### *Embedding versus Linking*

If you include YouTube or other video components where you have the option to embed



the file rather than linking to it, we would suggest embedding, as the content is more immediately attractive to the user with the graphic screen capture and will play directly in Desire2Learn rather than having to open a new window.

### **Word Processing Tools**

**Microsoft® Word 2007:** As noted earlier, this software includes a **Styles** option that allows you to format text and improve

navigation through headings. While we don't intend this to be a Microsoft tutorial, we encourage designers to explore the possibilities here. Headings and hyperlinks created in Word documents will be maintained if the documents are saved as web page, filtered

for uploading to Desire2Learn. The headings and links are also maintained if the document is saved in PDF format for uploading to Desire2Learn.

**Adobe® Acrobat 9 Professional:** Although not generally considered to be a word processor, Adobe can be a useful tool for converting documents created in Word to a PDF format that can be uploaded to Desire2Learn. Documents retain all the accessibility elements from Word, such as headings, captioned hyperlinks and graphics, and any table of contents created, all of which make it easier for a student to navigate through a document and explore it in sections as needed. Another advantage of using PDF format for content files is that it minimizes the number of graphic elements you need to store in your Desire2Learn shell as well as making it easier for students to save and print the file for offline use. Students who have Adobe® Acrobat 9 Professional on their own computers can also access the read-aloud feature if they save the file to their computer, a useful tool for auditory learners as well as for learners with auditory challenges.

### Suggested Resources

From [Desire2Learn Community](#): *Desire2Learn HTML Editor User Guide*, *Desire2Learn Creating Accessible Course Content User Guide* (see pages 2-3 for organization, pages 4-5 for web content standards),

From Microsoft® Office: [Using Styles in Word 2007](#)

From Adobe® Acrobat: [Getting Started with Accessibility](#) (for basic background, then check out Links and Resources)

## 4.1—Release Conditions: Just in time and just what I need

### What do I need to know about release conditions to get started?

**Release Conditions** are statements you can create that control how and when items such as content topics appear for users. You can also control dates topics are available through the **Availability** conditions. Both **Availability** and **Release Conditions** are

available in the **Restrictions** tab that appears when content is edited. They are available for Desire2Learn-created content or for content uploaded from another source. First, you need to create the conditions and then you can use them for other content topics as well, such as certain topics being available to users depending on a grade on a test or a dropbox item submitted. These can be useful ways to control how much content displays for users and to ensure that users see only the content that is relevant to them, such as review material that some students might need based on previous test scores.

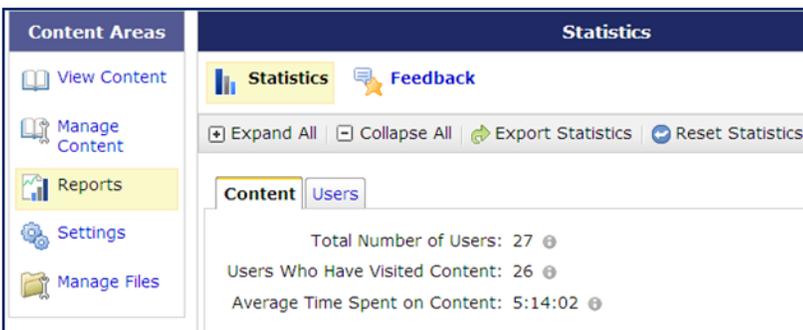
### Suggested Resources

From [Desire2Learn Community](#): Desire2Learn Release Conditions User Guide (see pages 1-7), Desire2Learn Creating Accessible Course Content User Guide (see page 4)

## 4.2—Reporting Tools: How do we communicate about what's working?

### What do I need to know about reporting tools to get started?

There are a number of ways to track how students access content and gather



feedback from them. We would like to focus on two methods available in the **Reports** section of the **Content** area: **Statistics** and **Feedback**. This information can also be exported if you

want to analyze trends in a spreadsheet.

**Statistics:** You can view statistics on content access through two tabs: **Content** and **Users**. If you would like to see how many students accessed the syllabus during the first week of class, you could select the **Content** tab and click on the link under **Users Visited** to see who has viewed the syllabus and when. If you want to track a specific

student, you can select Users and see the history of how many times that student has visited specific content topics. A note of caution here about Time Spent totals, however: this simply means the amount of time the content topic was displayed on the screen, not how long the student actually spent reading the content. If the topic was in PDF format, for example, the time spent may be very brief, as the student may have printed the file or saved it to his or her hard drive to view later. We generally use the content reports here as a way to gauge how many students have visited key content topics early in the course. If a student has not visited the syllabus, for example, by the end of the first week of the course, we might send a follow up e-mail to find out if the student was having difficulty getting into the course.

**Feedback:** Students can offer feedback and rate any topic in the content area by



clicking on the feedback balloon icon (between the printer and bookmark icons). Students can choose to rate the

topic from one to five stars, similar to the rating feature in Discussions, or they can rate the topic and include comments about the rating. Their rating and comments can

Feedback		
Statistics	Feedback	
<input type="checkbox"/> Expand All   <input type="checkbox"/> Collapse All    Export Feedback    Reset Feedback		
Course Feedback		
	Ratings	Average
ENGL 0090 90 Fundamentals of English	15	★★★★★
Course Information	11	★★★★★
Syllabus	5	★★★★★
Course Schedule	6	★★★★★

be anonymous or not as they choose, and they can come back later in the semester to edit their comments and rating.

Feedback can be reset to clear it out later or exported to a comma-separated-value file for analysis in a spreadsheet if you choose. If you view feedback that is not anonymous, you have the option to e-mail the student

about his or her feedback.

## Suggested Resources

From [Desire2Learn Community](#): Desire2Learn Content User Guide (see pages 36-38 for viewing content reports and content feedback)

## 5—'Something Special

### YouTube

Whether you create your own video or plan to use existing video at this site, we suggest embedding it rather than linking to it, using the HTML editor in widgets.

Included below are three *YouTube* videos Karen has created (or search for all of her videos under *trustanurse*) and three of Sherry's favorites. These are included as

links, as we didn't want this to be 40 pages long!



[Physical Assessment--Part 1](#)

[Cruising the Caribbean with the Z's](#)

[IM Remix](#)

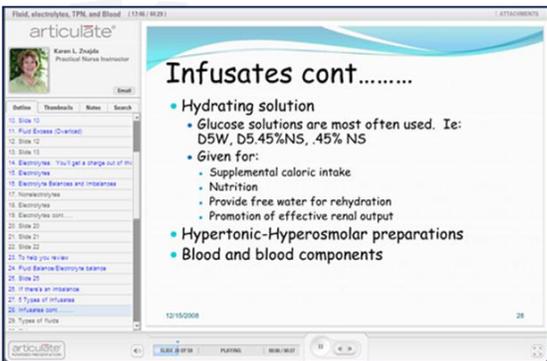
[Evolution of Dance](#)

[How to Paint the Mona Lisa with MS Paint](#)

[One Year in 40 Seconds](#)

You can use videos not only for educational purposes but also as an enticement. Sherry always includes a "Fun Stuff" module at the bottom of her content list, something that is often passed on to new students by word of mouth. She also has begun using conditional releases for some of the "Fun Stuff," such as completion of a unit or a

specific range of scores on a test.



### Articulate

Articulate is a software package that allows you to add audio commentary, self-tests, and learning games to PowerPoint slides and package them as an interactive video. With the additional "Engage" feature, you can add even more interactivity, with

special slides that can take students through the steps in a process or provide information about labeled points on a graphic, for example. Both of us use it as a way to present classroom lecture material in an online setting for repeated viewing, which helps students in both the hybrid and online environments. Session participants who would like to see some examples are encouraged to e-mail Sherry with a request for guest log in access.

### SitePal

This is another web tool Karen uses to connect to her online students, available for a monthly fee. This site enables you to create a talking animation. You can select the character, the scene, the clothes, and so on. You then add your voice with whatever information you desire to convey. Karen generally uses this item in the news widget, although she has used it for course information, welcome, overviews of a course, and for assignment reviews. Again, it helps the instructor connect with the online student and explain items with a voice, instead of with printed information.

### **Additional Resources**

In addition to the sites featured above, we'd also like to recommend the following sites to help draw attention to your content.

[ToonDoo](#) (a free "comic book" creator, useful for welcome and course tours)

[Animoto](#) (free and fee site to bundle existing photos into animations with sound clips)

[How to Podcast with Audacity](#) (step-by-step directions on creating podcasts using Audacity's free software)

## **Data**

Between 2005 and 2009, both instructors collected data related to content access. Sherry tracked final grades compared to first syllabus access, while Karen tracked content design satisfaction.

## Sherry's Data

More students viewed significant content, such as syllabi and course schedules, earlier in the semester, and the number of e-mail messages and phone calls related to "I can't find the syllabus" or "I don't know what to do," dropped to virtually none by 2009.

In addition, the number of students succeeding in the course (a grade of C or better) increased during the same period, although we cannot claim that was due solely because they were able to find and access content. Still, it is a positive sign.

## ENGL0090 Fundamentals of English

Fall 2005, 54% of students viewed the syllabus online, hybrid course, paper syllabus provided, course not leveled at this point, although self-paced, 38% received a D or F

Fall 2006 100% of students viewed syllabus online, online-only course with small enrollment of 6, first use of leveled course format for grade contracting, 0% received a D or F

Spring 2007 82% of students viewed syllabus online, 2 hybrid courses, first time paper copy not provided, first time widget used with links to course files, 42% received a D or F overall

Fall 2007 54% of students viewed syllabus online in hybrid and online-only courses combined, 39% in hybrid course and 70% in online-only course, 22% received a D or F overall, 26% in hybrid course, 17% in online-only course

Spring 2008 67% of students viewed syllabus online in hybrid and online-only courses combined, 62% in hybrid course, 71% in online-only course, 21% received a D or F overall, 24% in hybrid course, 19% in online-only course

Fall 2008 74% of students viewed syllabus, course offered online only, widget changed from table design to links-only design, 34% received a D or F (Note: Fall 2008 course was last to fill after on-campus sections closed, surge in enrollment, perhaps less-prepared students.)

Spring 2009—widget changed to content links rather than course file links—add after first week of May 2009, final grade data not available by Fusion's required submission date.

## Karen's Survey Data Spring 2009: 3 sections

### 1. How would you prefer the material in contents to be displayed?

All material open from beginning to end 61%

Material open for the particular unit 33%

No preference 6%

### 2. How would you prefer the grades to be displayed in the gradebook?

Entire gradebook open from beginning to end right from the start 90%

As each unit opens, have the corresponding graded items opened 6%

No preference 4%

### 3. How would you rate your personal benefit from the different technology tools utilized in this course?

Highly beneficial for my success in this course 43%

Beneficial for my success in this course 55%

No benefit to my success in this course 1%

### 4. How would you rate the accessibility of retrieving the information in contents?

Easy to access 98%

Difficult to access 1%

### 5. Were the hyperlinks in the Desire2Learn homepage helpful?

Yes 97%

No 0%

No preference 3%

## 6. When thinking about how items are listed in content, how would you prefer them listed?

Vertically 60%

Horizontally 13%

No preference 26%

### COMMENTS

- Hyperlinks were used a lot
- Did not like taking the unit information off after finishing the unit
- Articulate recordings were great
- Office hours in Desire2Learn Chat were a nice touch
- Would rather have the gradebook grouped in Units versus assignments, quizzes/exams.
- When using weighted grades, have the grade calculated at all times
- Liked the separate discussion for each unit for questions
- I like the animations!
- Keep all the information in contents throughout the course
- Put more information on personal calendars
- Would prefer more items on homepage and less in contents

## Other Useful "Stuff" to Consider

### FAQ Documents

Consider making an FAQ document that appears near the top of your content list. Once it's made, update it each semester with new FAQs asked by students. This often results in fewer questions at crucial points in the semester and fewer frantic e-mails. It also saves time for the instructor to focus on other issues.

## Orientation Quizzes

Another way to familiarize students with content is to make an orientation quiz. Ask students to print or save the syllabus on their computer. Then create an "open book" quiz for them to take the first week or two of the semester that highlights key elements of the course. This is also a way to document who has reviewed the syllabus early in the semester as a way to head off future problems.

## Unit "Tips"

Try making a PowerPoint presentation or a checklist document that walks students through everything they'll need to do to be successful in the unit, such as a list of required assignments, directions on how to submit an assignment (such as by e-mail or through the dropbox), and any quizzes or tests that may need to be completed

## Targeted Discussions

Both of us use discussions related to content, but Karen has a unique approach for nursing skills. Rather than have one discussion for all the skills, she sets up a discussion for each nursing skill. In this way, students can ask specific questions on that particular skill and know where to go to see responses from other students and the instructor on that skill, rather than scrolling through a long list of posts in a broader discussion topic.

## What's the take-away?

Instructors and designers need to consider how design choices affect a student's ability to be successful in their courses. Some advance preparation can save considerable re-work later and lessen the number of frantic e-mails and phone calls. The willingness to experiment with ways to present course content and share results with colleagues is also crucial.