10 Pedagogical Tips to Reduce Student Anxiety

A semester without long breaks due to the pandemic can be challenging for student’s mental health. Making simple changes to your course’s design can help.

Here are 10 practical suggestions for course design changes that can have a big impact. We encourage you to implement these to help all of our students.

1. One-word Reaction
   At the start of the semester, ask students how they feel about the course in one word. Students might respond with “anxious” or “scared.” This can signal your students may need some extra support. You can also use this tip at the beginning of a new week. Follow up on student’s concerns and assure them that you are on their team.

2. Communicate Expectations
   Communicate expectations about the course very clearly and often. Uncertainty about what is required or how activities will be evaluated can cause student anxiety. Make sure students know how they will be graded.

3. Break Down Big Projects
   Instead of a big deliverable, break down into small assignments. This method can help minimize procrastination, anxiety, and provide more opportunities for feedback for improvement.

4. Limit Busywork
   Adding assignments “just to check if students are doing the work” creates additional burden on you and your students. Instead, consider optional or even unexpected drop-in activities that can help check for understanding.

5. Estimate Time
   Estimate how long each required activity or assignment will take students. We recommend posting the times on Canvas to help students manage their workload.
   Calculating time estimates can also help to make sure you are assigning appropriate levels of work and the load is relatively even throughout the term.

6. Give Study Guides
   Create and share study guides for your students to use for major exams and assessments.
   The primary advantage of a study guide is that it defines what students need to review for an exam in a reduced form. Examples include summary sheets, graphic overviews, and guiding questions.

7. Encourage Study Groups
   Connections are particularly important right now. Encourage your students to connect with one another and create study groups.
   You can facilitate this through Canvas to help students share their interests, availability, and contact info.

8. Know Who Can Help
   When you see students that are struggling, these campus resources are available to help:
   - Canvas Community Connections
   - Dr. Bill Blanchard Center Consulting Services
   - Family Counseling Center

9. Check-in with Students
   Create regular check-ins by asking students about non-subject-matter related topics. You can ask them to share their current favorite song or food, or other fun subjects.
   Also, make a point to touch base with students that might not be participating actively in class (synch or asynchronous).

10. Be Flexible and Understand
    While you will need due dates and clear expectations, students are going through a lot right now and they may need some grace. Encourage open communication and ask students to contact you if they are struggling with classes.
    Ask for feedback from students early and be open to updating the course to work best for your students.

For any questions about implementing these strategies, contact us at id@smu.edu.