TEACHING AND LEARNING SPOTLIGHT

Newsletter of Eastern's Center for Teaching, Learning, & Assessment

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In This Issue

Upcoming Workshops

Improving Blackboard Course Accessibility with Ally

Friday, October 10, 3 to 4 pm (virtual)
Led by Mauricio Calpa and Kathryn Rasimas, CIT, and Sandra Flores-Gonzales, OAS

This session will introduce faculty to Anthology Ally, a tool integrated into Blackboard that supports the creation of accessible course content. Faculty will learn how to:

- Interpret accessibility scores on course materials (and make sense of the red, yellow, and green gauges that appear next to content in Blackboard).
- Understand common accessibility issues.
- Use Ally's feedback to improve some content and raise accessibility scores.
- Alert students to tools that will automatically generate alternative file formats (e.g., audio, HTML, ePub, electronic braille).
- Locate resources to learn about making documents more accessible.

By the end of the session, instructors will understand how Ally can improve the accessibility of their course materials and enhance the learning experience for all students.

Register for this session. (This session will be recorded for those unable to attend.)

The Art of Slow Thinking to Improve Student Cognition (A Teaching Scholars session)

Tuesday, November 11, 12:30 to 1:30 pm
Presidents' Dining Room in Hurley Hall (Lunch provided by the CTLA – no registration required)
Led by Miriam Chirico, Professor of English

Thinking is hard. And as Daniel Willingham notes, students don't like school because the brain is not designed for thinking. Yet students in general education classes can acquire transferable "thinking routines" to understand not only the material, but their own mental habits.

In this session, Miriam Chirico will provide information about the focus of her 2024-2025 Teaching Scholars project, in which students in her Poetry class were given strategies to assist their habits of mind. By introducing them to Daniel Kahneman's cognitive model of System 1 Thinking (fast, instinctive) and System 2 Thinking (deliberative, slow, logical), she enabled students to consciously develop mental habits. Students approached the same text twice, using "fast" thinking for initial responses and "slow" thinking for logical rigor. As students analyzed poetry through fast and slow thinking, applied cognitive schemas created by Project Zero, and wrote "Thinking Reports" (instead of typical theme papers), they developed greater awareness of their intellectual abilities.

Dr. Chirico will share the results of her study of this intervention.

Reflective Teaching Tip

Soliciting Mid-Semester Feedback from Students

Between now and the middle of the semester is an ideal time to ask students to share their reflections about how class is going. Asking students for feedback at this stage has several benefits,[1] such as:

- Understanding which instructional strategies are and are not working well to support learning (particularly helpful if you are trying something new this semester)
- Identifying small changes you can make now to improve the student learning experience (and potentially avoid surprises in your course evaluations at the end of the semester)
- Enhancing student engagement and encouraging communication between you and your students
- Prompting students to reflect on their learning—and how their own behavior is affecting their learning

In addition, the feedback you receive is often more specific and actionable than what you might read in end-of-year course evaluations.

When collecting mid-semester feedback from students, it's suggested that you explain why you are doing so and how you'll use the information. After analyzing the results, share with the class what you learned and how you plan to respond. This builds trust and has the added bonus of modeling reflective practice for students.[2]

An Example of Collecting and Responding to Mid-Semester Feedback

I recently asked students to complete an anonymous questionnaire about their experiences in our course so far. Students had the option to hand write their response on a paper copy or to complete it online using a QR code. I asked 5 questions:

1. What about this class is going well/working well for you?
2. What is not going well/working well for you?
3. What (if anything) do you wish we had covered more in Unit 1?
4. What suggestions do you have for the rest of the semester (or the next time I teach this class)?

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[1] Nasrollahian, S. (2024, February 16). *Mid-semester student feedback.* Iowa Center for Teaching. https://teaching.center.uiowa.edu/news/2024/02/mid-semester-student-feedback

[2] Center for Teaching and Learning (n.d.) *Mid-semester feedback.* University of Texas at Austin. https://ctl.utexas.edu/mid-semester-feedback

5. What changes would YOU like to make to ensure your success in this class? (e.g., in your homework or reading habits, attendance, engagement during class, etc.)

Students said that they appreciated the active learning elements in class and the small group discussions. A few students noted that they weren't feeling confident about their understanding of a couple of key concepts we had discussed and read about. Many students indicated that they were struggling with time management and the reading load of college in general, and a couple students indicated mental health challenges. (17 out of 30 students in this course are first-year students.)

The next time we met, I shared slides summarizing common themes/responses and then described my plan for the rest of the semester. This included what I plan to *keep* doing, things I plan to adjust (including revisiting some of those key concepts), and things I cannot change and why (including the 8 am start time). Based on their responses, I also provided a handout to **all** students with QR codes for CAPS and the ASC tutoring center (which can provide assistance with general study and time management skills)—and I let them know that many students find these services helpful. My hope was that students left knowing that I cared about their learning experience, and that if they were finding some aspects of college to be challenging, they weren't alone (and that they knew where to get help).

Other Mid-Semester Feedback Strategies

Columbia University's Center for Teaching and Learning recommends what they call the Start, Stop, Continue method, which asks just three questions to get students to reflect on their learning:

1. What can we **start** doing in this class that would help you learn?
2. Is there anything we should **stop** doing that isn't helping you learn?
3. What should we **continue** doing that is helping you learn?

Other ideas for open-ended questions can be found from the Mid-Course Survey Question Bank at Lafayette College.

For additional ideas on collecting mid-semester feedback, visit the UT Austin Center for Teaching and Learning. The site includes downloadable feedback forms you can edit.

Digital Accessibility Tip of the Month

Improving Access to PDFs

Contributed by Sandra Flores-Gonzales, Office of AccessAbility Services (OAS)

As we transition into the heart of the fall semester, we aim to equip our students with as many tools as possible to maximize access and engagement with content. Curating and creating content that supports diverse individual learning styles is key.

One type of document that frequently results in accessibility issues for students are documents that have been scanned and then uploaded as PDFs to Blackboard. One tip to enhance the accessibility of scanned PDF files is to apply the OCR (Optical Character Recognition) feature tool to the PDF file—it's described as the PDF being OCRd. When a document has been scanned but **not** OCRd, screen reader applications will render the file as an inaccessible image and will not be able to access any text information.

Why This Matters

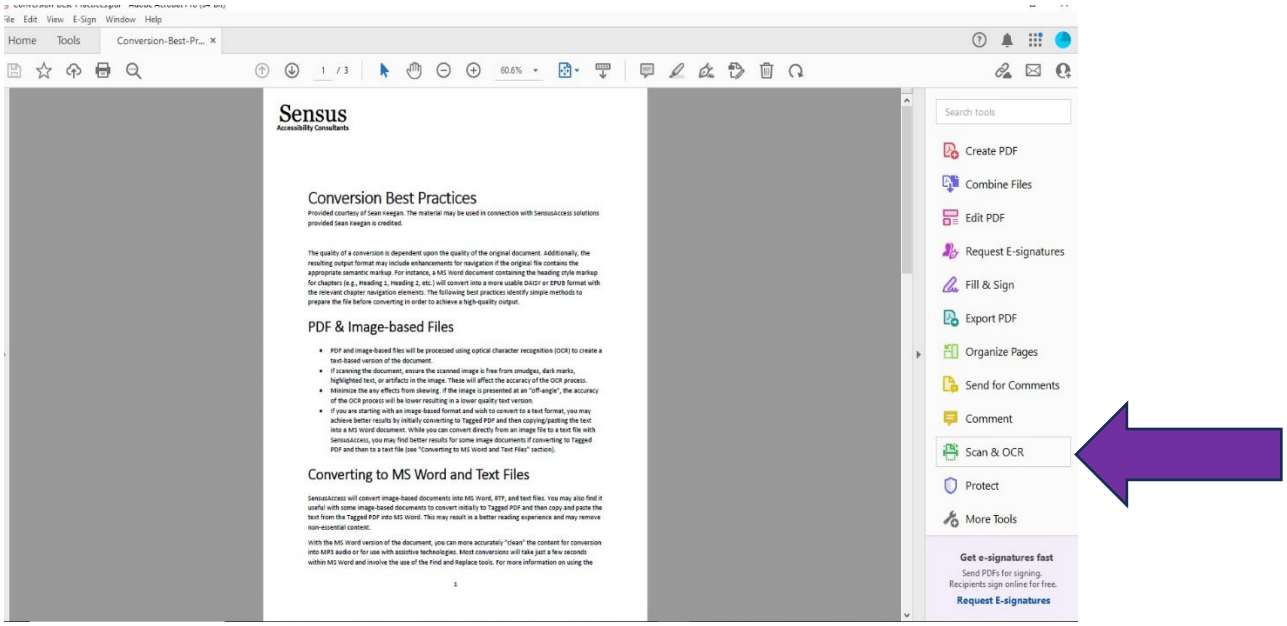
When documents posted to Blackboard have already been OCRd, it means that students who have an audio text alternative format approved accommodation can immediately access the document without seeking support from the OAS. In addition, many students benefit from accessing content in an audio format, so adding OCR to your PDFs could increase comprehension and engagement with content.

There are other benefits to a PDF file that has been OCRd. It improves the searchability and retrieval of specific words or phrases within the file. It also allows users to highlight sections to convert into other file formats, such as a Word document for notetaking. And OCR makes indexing files for management systems possible.

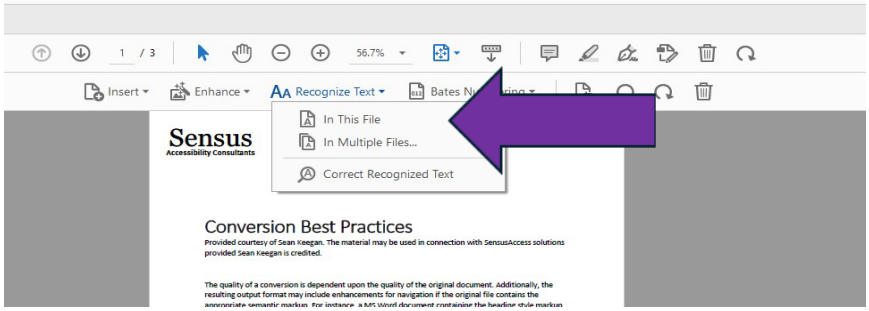
Incorporating the OCR technique into the workflow of preparing scanned PDFs also helps meet the updated New Rule for Title II of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act), and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA.

How to OCR a PDF file

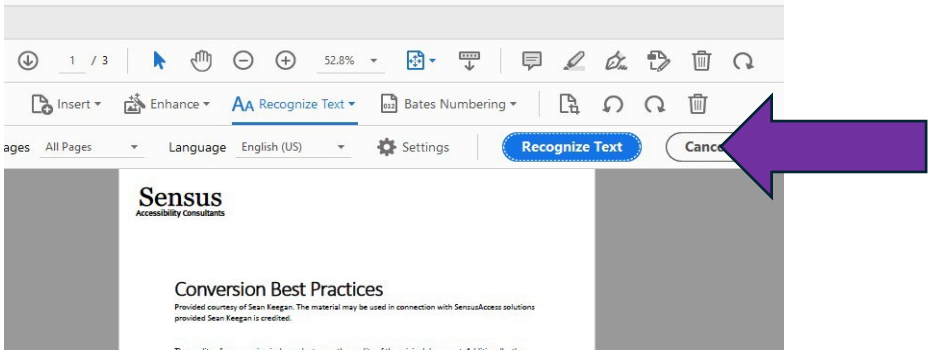
Step 1: Open a file in Adobe Acrobat Pro DC and select **Scan & OCR tool.**



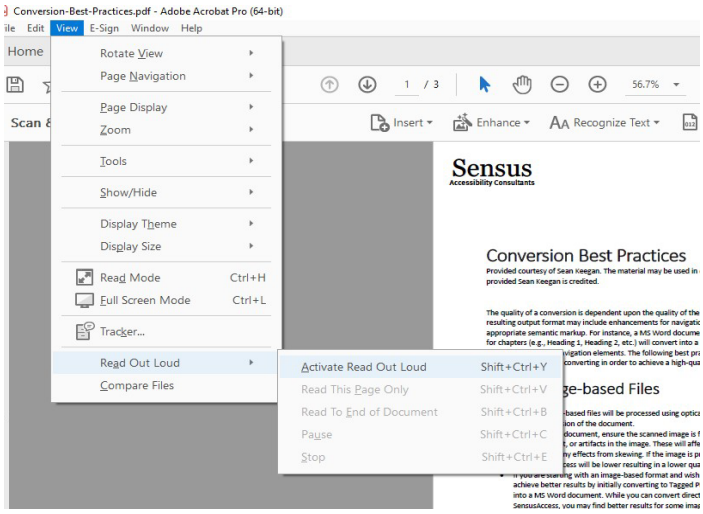
Step 2: Select **Recognize Text** and **In This File**.



Step 3: Select **Recognize text**.



Step 4: To activate read aloud: Go to **View** > **Read Out Loud** > **Activate Read Aloud**.



Please note that files containing images, graphs, charts, or more complex forms of information may require additional repair, like adding alternative text. To help repair more complex forms of information, you can try converting your file into a Word document using our conversion tool on our SensusAccess and Digital Accessibility page, which includes more detailed information on how to get started.

Additional OAS Resources

The Office of AccessAbility Services (OAS) invites you to explore our OAS Supports SharePoint site, which provides detailed information about the services and resources we offer to support both students and faculty.

For those who are new to Eastern, welcome! We also encourage you to stop by our office located in Wood Support Services, Room 204, to meet our staff and become familiar with the support we provide.

Even if you're already familiar with OAS, we recommend taking a few moments to browse the SharePoint site—it may serve as a helpful refresher and a reminder of how we are here to assist you and your students throughout the academic year. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.

Tech Tip (A periodic column from CIT)

Student Preview Tool in Blackboard: Quick Guide for Faculty

Contributed by Mauricio Calpa, Center for Instructional Technology

Student Preview allows you to view your course exactly as students do. Use it to verify access to course content, test submissions, and confirm how grades/feedback appear. Student Preview logs you in as a real preview student.

When to use Student Preview

- Use it after you have created or updated assignments, tests, discussions, or conditional release rules.
- Demonstrate Blackboard use in class without displaying confidential student information.
- Use it to confirm the My Grades tool is properly showing the correct columns, calculations, and feedback to your students.

How to Enter Student Preview Mode

For instructions on how to enter Student Preview mode, watch a brief tutorial. Once in student preview mode, Blackboard will create a preview user (e.g., LastName_PreviewUser) and enroll them in the course. There will be a banner at the top of the course to indicate, "Student Preview mode is ON."

Student Preview in Action

Below are a few recommendations to consider when using Student Preview.

- Demonstrate to your class how to submit an assignment
    - Show them how to attach a file, how to access their grade, and how to access instructor feedback. (Many students—especially first-year students—don't know how to find assignment feedback.)
- Take a test/quiz
    - Confirm the test settings are properly set and the results display.
- Post in a discussion or journal to verify availability and grading.
- Access the My Grades tool to confirm column visibility, weights, and feedback are working as intended.

Keeping vs Deleting when Exiting Student Preview

When you exit Student Preview mode, you'll be asked whether you want to keep or delete the user and associated data. The table below provides some guidance.

Option	Best for	What happens
Delete	Quick checks, final pre-launch review	Removes preview user & all attempts, posts, grades; unenrolls the preview user
Keep	Ongoing testing of the **gradebook**, **assignments, etc.**, or repeated demos	Preview user stays enrolled; data remains visible in **roster**, **Grade Center**, discussions, etc.

Example: Using Student Preview on an Assignment

Here is an example of two ways you might use Student Preview related to a specific assignment. In this case, we'll call it "Assignment 1" and assume it has a due date and a rubric, and that you're allowing multiple submission attempts.

Troubleshooting: Confirm whether students can see Assignment 1.

1. While in Student Preview, try to access Assignment 1.
2. If it's missing, exit Student Preview and check Assignment 1's settings:
    a. **Availability:** Is the assignment visible to students?
    b. Is the **date/time** release correctly set?
    c. Are **Adaptive Release's** membership, grade, or performance criteria properly set?
    d. Is the **content area link** hidden?
3. Return to **Student Preview** and recheck availability.
4. Submit a sample assignment and verify it appears in **Needs Grading** and **My Grades** as expected.

Teaching demo: Show students how to submit an assignment and access grades/feedback.

1. Enter Student Preview.
2. Navigate to **Assignment 1** → open **Instructions** → click **View rubric** to explain the criteria.
3. Click **Submit**, attach a sample file, and submit.
4. Show the **submission receipt** and where to **resubmit** if multiple attempts are allowed.
5. Open **My Grades** to point out: item name, status (Needs Grading/Submitted), rubric link, and feedback location.

Tips to Keep in Mind When Using Student Preview

- The preview user appears in your roster (students can see and reply to it in discussions).
- The same preview user is reused across your courses when you enter Student Preview mode.
- If you leave the course while still in preview, you'll return in preview mode the next time you access the course.
- For groups, emails, and announcements, delete the preview user when you're done to avoid receiving notifications and emails to Outlook.
- Some 3rd-party tools may not be compatible with Student Preview mode, so please contact CIT (CIT@easternct.edu) to properly test such tools before students access the course.

Please feel free to book a remote one-on-one training session with CIT staff to test Student Preview Mode.

Update from the Assessment Coordinator

Assessing Quantitative Literacy and Ethical Reasoning

This week, faculty teaching ELAC courses with either **Ethical Reasoning (ER)** or **Quantitative Literacy (QL)** as the primary learning outcome will be receiving instructions for how to submit assignment prompts and student artifacts. Faculty are asked to submit these items anytime during the semester, with a final deadline of December 31st.

Information about how to submit (as well as general information about the purpose of assessment, anonymization procedures, and how data is used) can also be accessed through the ELAC assessment Sharepoint site.

If you were not able to attend the virtual information session for faculty teaching ER and QL courses on September 3rd, you can access the recording and materials from that session.

Please send feedback or questions about assessment to the Assessment Coordinator, Dr. Suki Grandhi, at grandhis@easternct.edu.

External Faculty Development Opportunities

Free (or very low cost) opportunities

- October 8, 4:10 – 4:40 pm: OneHE is offering a free virtual session on **Exploring the Ethics of AI**, led by Cate Denial. The session will focus on how Dr. Denial and her students engaged with the ethical questions of GenAI and the impact of those conversations on student learning.
- October or November (asynchronous): Alchemy is offering a free opportunity to earn an **AI Literacy Microcredential** designed specifically for faculty and instructional designers. The 4-module program takes about 2 hours to complete and covers AI fundamentals, ethical considerations, teaching applications, and strategic AI use. The asynchronous program is available for free for a short time as a pilot program.
- Ongoing: The authors of *The Opposite of Cheating* have developed a **weekly podcast on teaching for integrity in the age of AI**. The podcast features the voices of faculty across the U.S. who have been wrestling with adjusting their assignments, assessments, and course design to adapt to the realities of generative AI.
- October 22, 4:10 – 4:40 pm: OneHE is hosting a free webinar on the **Opposite of Cheating: Teaching for Integrity in the Age of AI**, led by the authors of the book.
- October 29, 2 – 3 pm: Stony Brook University is hosting **Say Hello to AI: How Do You Teach With Today's Innovation?** The free virtual panel discussion will share practical strategies for integrating AI-related advancements into course content.
- Self-paced and online: UNC Chapel Hill has launched a free, 3-part asynchronous training on **Changing Attitudes: Fostering Inclusion and Belonging for Neurodivergent University Students**. While some resources mentioned in the training are specific to UNC, the training is designed to help anyone working with college students better understand neurodiversity and how to cultivate a more supportive environment for neurodiverse students.

Other opportunities

- Various dates in October and November: UConn's Statistical Consulting Services is offering a series of day-long **virtual workshops** covering R programming, statistics in R, and mixed effects models.
- October 17: Goodwin University is hosting its 4th annual **Universal Design for Learning (UDL) conference** in East Hartford, CT. This year's theme is "Learning-Driven Design."
- October 17: The **New England Faculty Development Consortium** is hosting its fall faculty development conference in Worcester, MA. This year's theme is "Teaching That Aligns With Our Values" and features Dr. Tracie Addy as keynote speaker.

- October 26 – 28: IUPUI is hosting its annual **Assessment Institute** in Indianapolis, billed as the "the oldest and largest U.S. event focused on assessing and improving higher education."
- November 2 – 5: The College Autism Network is hosting the **College Autism Summit** in Pittsburgh, PA. The goal of the summit is to "discuss evidence-driven strategies that help support college students with autism and related learning differences."
- November 6 – 8: The **Red Rock Great Teaching Retreat** is hosting its Fall retreat in Bryce Canyon, Utah (the Winter retreat will be held February 26 – 28).
- November 20 – 22: Miami University is hosting the **Original Lilly Conference on College Teaching** in Oxford, OH.
- December 17 – 18: The Center for Grading Reform is holding an online **Alternative Grading Institute**. Participants will work to revise one course during the institute. Applications to participate are due October 15.
- January 12 – 16: The University of Delaware's Institute for Transforming University Education is hosting an online workshop on **Integrating Problem Based Learning and Artificial Intelligence**.

Opportunities to Share Your Teaching and Learning Expertise

- Due October 5: Temple University is currently accepting proposals for their annual **Faculty Conference on Teaching Excellence**, to be held January 7-8 in Philadelphia, PA. This year's theme is "Keeping the Promise: Building Academic Bridges to Support Student Success."
- Due October 20: Proposals are currently being accepted for the **SoTL Commons Conference**, be held February 25-27 in Savannah, GA, at Georgia Southern University.

A recent rainy day outside Webb Hall