So, which assignment above did your eye zoom to first? Which one would your students be more likely to click? Having a visually-appealing Blackboard course isn’t just about enhancing the cosmetics of the pages. If done right, it can steer your students to the right resources, help them prioritize tasks, and influence how they perceive the content and activities you post to Blackboard.

A recent Carnegie Mellon study* examined how our brains work when we choose between two similar objects. Before we even make the conscious decision to pick this stapler or that stapler, our brains have already decided which is visually better. That influences our purchasing decision. The biggest application of this study has been to develop a system for finding the best thumbnail images to put on websites to increase clicks. Visual appeal = more clicks = more income.

For us, visual appeal = more clicks = less chance for failure. In my online education experience there were a few times that I didn’t complete an assignment, not from laziness or not caring, but because I just didn’t see it. All the text just looked the same, and I didn’t realize that I had skipped something. Adding an icon to your Blackboard posts is quick and easy, and is very helpful to students. I’ve made a tutorial video showing you how to do this. Check out my blog to see it.

Try timetoast

Help students visualize history

When we combine content, visuals, and interactivity to explain a topic, students explore it more deeply and will learn more from the experience.

Timetoast is a free online program that allows you to add events to a timeline and post it for public viewing. That’s nothing new, but imagine if students in your classroom could use their smartphones to access the timeline that you created to discuss WWII, and could follow along with the events and pictures of characters as you explain them to the class.

Later, students can use the hyperlinks you placed in the timeline to guide their research or to help them review for a test.

You can even embed a timeline in your Blackboard Content or in a PowerPoint to be a more integrated part of your course.

Go to http://www.timetoast.com/categories, find your content, and see how you could use this tool. To see a tutorial video of how to use timetoast with your Blackboard course visit my blog.

Keep going, more on page 2:

An unexpected resource for finding online course ideas

Raising the Bar + U Innovate = $
What you can learn from a MOOC

Online education is for instructors, too.

I would estimate that 80% of the best things I did as a classroom teacher were “borrowed” from somebody else. They came from books, online resources, workshops... Very few ideas were straight out of my head. I did invent “Periodic Table Battleship” while in the shower one morning, pondering how to make Electron Configurations a less boring topic. I was really pleased with myself but later found online that I wasn’t the first to think of this. Ego-bummer.

The growing presence of MOOCs, (Massive Open Online Courses) on the web has opened a new, high-quality resource to you. A MOOC is a free course, completely online, usually around 6 weeks long. They are increasingly being offered by “traditional” institutions like Stanford, MIT, Ohio State... The MOOC movement is about making their content public for the world, and a MOOC is a great place for you to get ideas of what you would like to do in your own courses. This is especially true if you want to increase the online content of your course but have no idea what that would look like. What better way to learn what an online course can do than to take one? The experience of being an online student will make you aware of the types of things you should and shouldn’t do in your own course.

By taking a MOOC in your own content, you will find new materials, new resources, new ways of looking at the same tasks, and new strategies that you never would have thought of on your own. The open format of a MOOC means that you can choose how much time you want to devote to the course, although one benefit of a MOOC is the high level of resource-sharing, and the more effort you put into the course, the more reward you will get out of it.

A good place to start looking into this is at https://www.coursera.org/. Coursera is the host of almost 200 MOOCs, from 33 universities. Go to their site, look through their list of courses, and see what they have to offer you. They even tell you what the expected time commitment is for each course. I’m starting a course on creating Android apps soon, and I might take “The Science of Gastronomy” from The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Mmm... gluten formation and protein denaturing.

For more information about MOOCs and how to use them, visit my blog.