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Optimizing the Online Classroom for Mobile Learners

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Optimizing the Online Classroom for Mobile Learners

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The Challenge

Many, if not most, students use the *Canvas Student* app as their first and primary access method for our online courses via cell phones and tablets. Some students even report exclusively using the *Canvas Student* app as their sole method for completing online courses.

The challenge is that most, if not all, instructors design and organize their online classrooms using a traditional desktop/laptop environment. These different methods of course access tend to result in vastly different user experiences which oftentimes puts mobile learners at a distinct disadvantage. **As a result, it's crucial to ensure that online classrooms are optimized for our mobile learners.**

An Example

Consider, for example, a fairly standard home page that feature a banner, heavy HTML table, and .png icons (see fig. 1). Pages like these are often designated as a course landing page for all users entering the classroom. When viewed from a traditional browser, it's very clear and effective.

Fig. 1. Desktop view of home page

Unfortunately, these home pages don't always render properly when viewed from within the mobile app (see fig. 2). Furthermore, when accessing course content from the app, students aren't automatically directed to the course home page designated by instructors (see fig. 3).
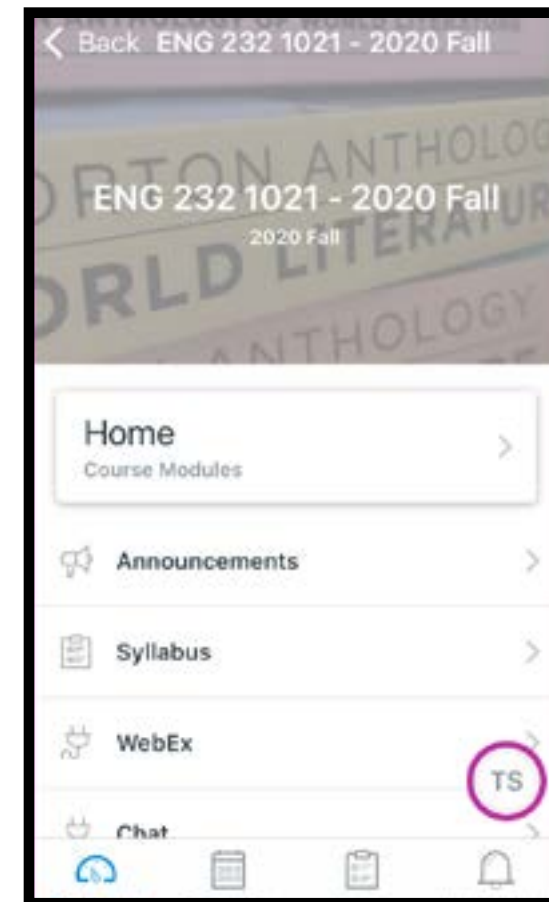

Fig. 2   Fig. 3

A Solution

The simplest method to ensure that your online classroom is mobile-friendly is through testing your course using a combination of the *Canvas Teacher* AND *Canvas Student* apps (figures 4-5).
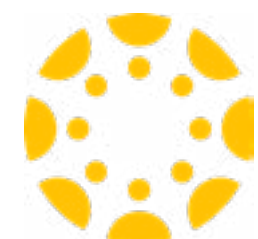

Fig. 4. Canvas Teacher   Fig. 5. Canvas Student

How To

From within your course in *Canvas Teacher*, scroll down to the bottom of the main menu and select "Student View" (fig. 6). This will open your course within the *Canvas Student* app. As seen in figures 2-3, this is indicated by a pink circle around the letters "TS" for test student. Viewing your course through **Canvas Student provides you with the opportunity to interact with and test your course from the exact same perspective as your students.**
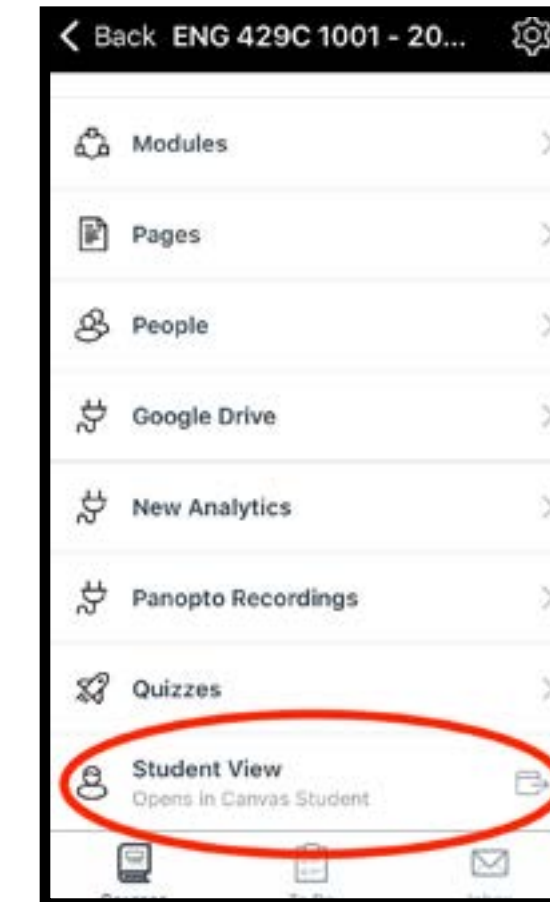

Fig. 6

Some Considerations

First, consider assigning a technology survey quiz early in the semester to better understand how students are accessing your course (and plan accordingly).

Second, it's best to avoid using proprietary document formats (.doc, .ppt, .pdf) if at all possible. They oftentimes have trouble displaying on mobile devices and when they do, they can be difficult to read on small screens. Instead, strive to provide as much course material as possible via Pages formatted using the Rich Content Editor. **This approach has three benefits:** course materials are automatically resized and reformatted for mobile users, students aren't forced to leave the online classroom, and students don't need to purchase extra software.

Third, because the Canvas apps open to their own main menu, and not the instructor-designated home page (fig. 3), **overall course organization and presentation needs to be carefully considered.** Instead, consider organizing your course using Modules and using them as the home page. They're flexible in that they can be organized a variety of ways (e.g. individual weeks or topical units). More importantly, modules display the same for all students irrespective of access method.

And last but not least, always check accessibility.

Resources

Canvas Teacher app downloads: Apple Android
Canvas Student app downloads: Apple Android

Canvas Instructor Guides: Rich Content Editor, Mobile Apps, Accessibility Checker, Pages, Modules

Mobile-friendly templates (Canvas login required): Weekly Homework Page, Discussion Prompt w/ Participation Instructions, Small Group Discussion Prompt, Group-Led Discussion Prompt, Essay Assignment, Peer Review Assignment, Weekly Module Layout, Technology Survey

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