



How to Make Static Resources More Interactive

The Future of Digital Education is Here. So Why Are Faculty Using Their Old Handouts In Online Learning?

Years ago, when you pictured the future of education, what did you imagine it would look like? Students zooming in on a substance to see its molecular structure without having to prepare a slide or use a microscope? The ability to virtually travel back in time and see what life was like in a different century? Virtual laboratories where students perform experiments too dangerous to perform in real life?

Whatever your image of the classroom of the future looked like, I'm guessing you didn't imagine this in your science-fiction classroom: faculty members uploading their existing in-class handouts to the LMS as PDFs. Of course you didn't; why would the teachers of the future use static resources like handouts, when they'd have so many other exciting new tools on hand?

Unfortunately, according to Schoology's 2017 [Global State of Digital Learning in Higher Ed](#) report, static resources comprise a big chunk of the content used in online courses at the college level. When faculty and administrators were asked what types of digital content are most commonly used in digital learning, 87 percent of respondents said faculty members at their institutions are using PDFs, Word Docs, and other static text-based resources.

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Like it or not, the future is here. The educators of the future (reader, that's you) can do better than PDFs and Word Docs. It is understandable that this can be daunting, so this article will explore the sorts of resources you can use in place of static, text-based resources in your online and blended learning.

And hey—if you're worried about having to throw out your faithful PDFs and handouts, don't be. This article will also help you transform those old workhorses into interactive resources.

Come. Let's explore the future — well, the present — of education.

But First, a Word on Other Passive Resources

Before we get into interactivity, we should talk about the second most popular type of online content, according to Schoology's report on digital learning: video.

Sixty-one percent of respondents said their online learning uses videos hosted elsewhere online: YouTube, Khan Academy, or Vimeo, for example. Almost 41 percent use videos that were created by the instructors themselves or by their institution.

While videos are a great way to get information to students who might have a hard time ingesting information they read, videos share a drawback with PDFs—they are not interactive. Students sit and take in a video passively, if in fact, they take it in at all.

In some ways, videos are another symptom of instructors simply moving their old resources onto an LMS—think of a classroom in the early '00s, when instructors would wheel a television to the front of a lecture hall and pop in a DVD. This also goes for PowerPoint presentations, the newest iteration of a slide projector. Without an instructor standing there, stopping the video to ask questions, or using a presentation as a springboard for discussion, these materials lose value.

Fortunately, there's a way to make these resources interactive. More on that later.

First let's look at some simple ways to make your handouts, PDFs, and other text-based resources more interactive for your students.

From Static Resources to Digital Discussions

This is an easy element for an instructor to add to a course. Most learning platforms offer a class discussion feature, and you should use it — and often. Online discussions are one of the big benefits of digital learning, according to recent research.

[A 2015 review of studies of online discussion boards](#) shows that students are much more likely to participate in an online discussion than in a face-to-face discussion. This happens for a variety of reasons; sometimes students are shy in person, sometimes they tune out, sometimes they might not speak the language well enough catch everything that's being said, and some students who can't hear well may have trouble following an in-class discussion. These students are more likely to participate online.

In fact, you shouldn't limit yourself to just one or two online discussions per course. The research also shows that students begin class discussions by communicating with their teachers, but as they grow more

comfortable in the discussion, the students will start speaking to and collaborating with each other.

You want that; in the age of student-centered digital learning, the instructor shouldn't be at the center of the discussion, but should act as a coach who monitors and guides the interaction, keeping an eye out for students who might try to start a flame war (the evidence suggests this is pretty rare in class settings) and providing a nudge every once in a while to keep the conversation fresh and relevant.

So discussion boards are great, but how do you use them? What should your class be discussing? This is where your PDFs, Word Docs and even videos can come in. (See? I told you you wouldn't have to throw them away.)

Choose a static resource that seems likely to provoke discussion and ask your students to read it. Then write a prompt question based on the resource and ask the class to discuss it.

You may want to require each student to make an original posting before responding to others for their participation to count, or you may want to [try the alternate approach](#) of requiring one or two original thoughts in a response to another student.

Rather than simply asking your students to read the PDF, now you're forcing them to read it, reflect on it, and talk about it with their classmates.

From Static Resources to Learning Modules (or, Non-Summative Quizzes)

The online quiz is a staple of digital learning, and this method is a twist on that. And, bonus—it's also a way for you to use your existing static resources.

You may already be posting your PDF and quizzing students on it for credit (similar to the discussion board method above), but have you considered actually turning the content of the PDF into a learning module?

A learning module is a quiz that isn't really a quiz. It's an instructional tool that alternates content and questions so that students can learn small parts of a larger text a little bit at a time. In other words, it's a learning opportunity for them, and an opportunity for you to see how well they've understood the concepts in your static resources. You don't even have to grade them on this. Plus, if you deliver learning modules via a learning platform, such as a learning management system (LMS), you and your students can get automated feedback in real time.

How do you turn your PDF into a learning module? First, break down the content of your handout into the most important conceptual chunks. Then, write questions that will help you assess your students'

understanding of those concepts.

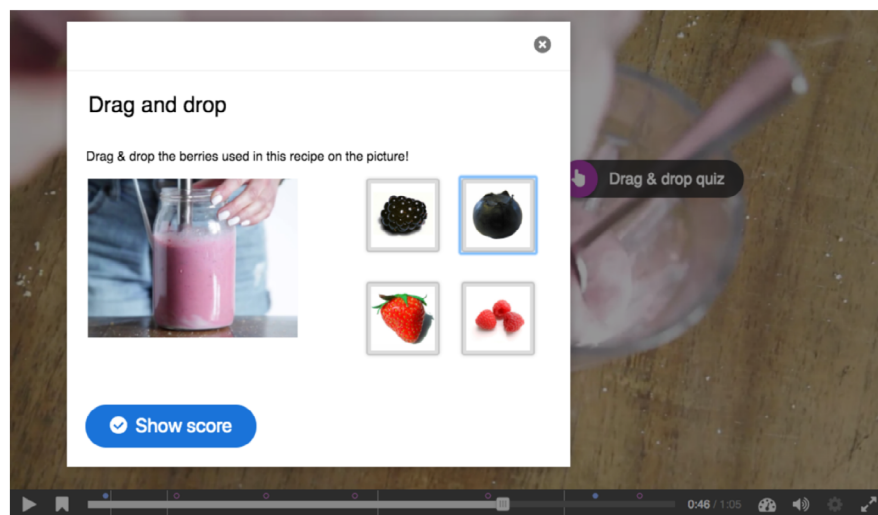
This approach may require you to do a little writing and editing, to ensure each concept is presented in a way that will allow students to interact with it, answer questions about it, and ultimately understand it.

The Emergence of Interactive Videos and Images

Repurposing your existing static resources is great, but there plenty of other interactive resources faculty can easily create and add to a course—even if building those resources might seem intimidating at first.

Videos, mentioned earlier as a passive course element, are a good starting point for this discussion, because they can be made interactive.

Interactive video is a format that allows educators to embed interactive elements like quizzes, hotspots, or commentary into a video. Rather than sit passively while the video is playing, students must interact with it—answering questions, dragging and dropping, or filling in the blanks.



Still from an [interactive video by Joubel](#), CC BY 4.0

This is an approach that can be taken with images as well. There are several ways images can be made interactive; students can find a hotspot in a photo, compare juxtaposed images, or zoom in from a [normal view of an object to a magnified image](#) of that object.

Faculty without a technical background might balk at the idea of having to build an interactive video or image, but there are tools online that can help instructors create such resources. Some, like [Verse](#) — a tool that lets instructors easily make interactive videos — are paid. Others, like [H5P](#), a platform that allows instructors to build and share interactive HTML5 content — are free.

H5P is important for another reason; it's a source for Open Educational Resources (OER) — resources created and freely shared by other educators. If an instructor doesn't feel comfortable building their own interactive images or videos, they may be able to find what they're looking for on H5P or on a site like the [OER Commons](#), a giant virtual library of educator-created resources that are free to use and share.

Games! Simulations! Virtual Reality!

Games, simulations, and virtual reality are definitely the sorts of resources that will hold your students' attention, but they are also the most intimidating elements to add to a course, especially for faculty new to digital education.

Many teachers don't have the skills to design a game, for one thing. Others might not know where to find a game or simulation appropriate for class, how to embed it in a course, or how to measure a students' performance.

Rather than let those valid concerns hold you back from trying to include a game, think about what sort of game would be ideal for your course, or how a simulation would serve your students. Would your students learn more about half-life and radiation if they could play with an atom in alpha decay? The [PhET Interactive Simulations project at the University of Colorado Boulder has a simulation for that](#). Do your students need a little more grounding in what life was like for the common people during the English Civil War? [Londoner](#), a text-based role-playing-game, will put your class in the shoes of someone who needs to make a living in 1644. Do your Econ 101 students need to understand what it is really like to live on minimum wage? Check out [Spent](#), a game that simulates a month of living below the poverty line.

There are a lot of games, simulations, and VR available online, and OERs are excellent resources for free materials that were built by educators for their own classes. You can search OER Commons, [MERLOT](#), or even your own institution's website. Many college and university libraries host a page with OER resources listed.

Using a game in your online course does sometimes come with challenges. Although games and simulations are available, they're not always compatible with every learning platform. You may have to post a link to out a game and let students play it online, for example.

If this is the case, how do you make sure they actually played it, or assess their performance on it?

There are a few options, and they echo the ways you'd engage students about a static resource. You can create an assignment around the game, perhaps requiring students to write an essay about their experience in London. Or you can require students to participate in a discussion about their experience trying to live on minimum wage in Spent. And because that game is fairly frustrating, I'd bet that class discussion would be lively.

If Institutions Want the ‘Classroom of the Future’ They Must Support Faculty

Remember the classroom of the future from the beginning of this article? The one with the virtual labs and the time travel? If you haven’t figured it out already from the examples you’ve read, all of those classroom activities are possible in online education, so long as you have the right course elements.

It is, however, completely understandable that instructors have been uploading their handouts to the LMS.

These resources are the instructors’ old friends, often painstakingly compiled and updated over a period of years. They’re filled with useful information and of course an instructor would want to keep that information in their online course.

But there’s another reason PDFs are so prevalent in digital courses: faculty are overwhelmed. Schoology’s Global State of Digital Learning in Higher Ed report showed that 38 percent of respondents don’t have time to implement digital tools or strategies. Additionally, 27 percent of instructors have trouble integrating their LMS into their existing workflow, 17 percent don’t have the support of the IT department, and 15 percent haven’t received training.

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Without support and with no time or incentive to figure out digital tools on their own, faculty are doing the best they can and slapping whatever resources they can online in a hurry.

Without the time, resources, or mental space to create courses, it makes sense that some faculty are putting together digital versions of their face-to-face courses rather than the creative online learning they may want to implement.

We’re living in the future. Educators—and institutions—just need to start teaching like it.

See why 20 million students and educators use Schoology’s Learning Management System (LMS) as their hub for education.

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About the Author



A.J. O’Connell

A.J. O’Connell is an edtech content writer, journalist, and former college instructor. You can find more about her at www.ajconnell.com