**Digital Textbooks: Working with  
publisher-provided online platforms**

*by Stacey M. Johnson*

Does your textbook include a digital supplement or online  
learning platform for students? How can instructors make  
good use of that valuable tool?

Particularly in introductory or survey courses, textbooks often come with an online learning platform where students can engage with course material in interactive ways. In fact, in many courses the online textbook supplement is the one of the most important forms of educational technology. I spoke with a few colleagues who make extensive use of publisher-provided platforms in class to find out how they are using these tools. If you are asking your students here at Vanderbilt to complete online homework or other activities through a publisher-provided platform, here are a few notes on the opportunities associated with the practice.

**Opportunity: Connect through Brightspace**

Did you know that Brightspace integrates with most publisher platforms? In the Content area, click on Existing Activities, and choose the external tools option.

For students, the link to publisher content will appear in the Content area or as a tab in the navigation bar at the top. Instructors have the ability to add links in either place. Check out the [Brightspace on-demand resources](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/brightspace/on-demand-resources/) page to learn how to add content to your Brightspace course.

After students set up their accounts for the first time, they can access the publisher-provided tools through single sign-on. That means that logging into Brightspace provides students with access to the publisher tools, and they will not need to log on separately to the publisher site. This seamless integration makes it easier for students to manage multiple technologies, while also allowing the instructor to add content and grades from the publisher platform to the course. Instructors will appreciate that all student grades from the publisher platform can be automatically added to the Brightspace Grades tool.

Contact Brightspace Support at the CFT at [brightspace@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:brightspace@vanderbilt.edu) if you need help getting your course set up.

**Opportunity: Focus on student learning**

The instructor should have a clear understanding of what students are doing through the online platform and how it’s helping them achieve learning goals. Online practice before coming to class can be a great way to help students understand key concepts and get feedback before applying knowledge in class. Follow up activities after class can aid in retention and reflection. For those instructors using a [flipped classroom model](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/flipping-the-classroom/), online activities through a publisher platform can support that effort.

*Play this audio clip:* <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/Quote1.mp3>

***Justin White:*** *The technology, the way I use it, is for student learning as opposed to measuring some sort of  a summative knowledge. I look at it as a formative way of learning instead of summative.*

***Vivian Finch:*** *Given the nature of, especially, introductory and intermediate courses, there are multiple sections. We also have to be intentional about how we are all using both the textbook and the online learning platform. So, if the decision is made to move forward as a group, then everyone uses it, right? So I think the ways in which I’ve used it in the past has really been to use it as sort of a homework supplement. I’ve found in the past when I first started using it, I would just assign it as sort of extra practice, right? And not really give students intentional grounding in why it was being assigned aside from extra practice. And I found that for a lot of students, they really did feel like that was busy work and not really useful. So, now when I assign homework, I do it in such a way where I make mandatory the homework that I think is going to be really important for them to do, and I make that transparent in terms of why I have assigned the things that I have. And then I leave everything else optional, right? So students have the opportunity to dig deeper and do more if they want to with the online platform. But I am much more intentional about what I select for them to do for homework that is assessed.*

**Opportunity: Communicate expectations clearly**

Students are more likely to engage fully with the assigned activities if they understand how the activities are helping them make progress towards the learning objectives. Instructors should take time to clarify what they expect from students and how meeting those expectations will translate into success in the course.

*Play this audio clip:* <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/quote2.mp3>

***Vivian Finch:*** *I sometimes have heard from students that they weren’t sure how they were always being assessed in terms of the homework. Even if I did assign certain homework activities, they didn’t know what the weight of certain activities were in comparison to other activities in the online platform. So I realized that I had to be more intentional about how they were being assessed in that process because it wasn’t always being made clear to them by the platform or by myself. I think with anything, with any decision that you make, you have to make sure that you are communicating clearly with students as to why you’re making these decisions. Especially when you are using different mediums for how you’re asking them to engage in a course. So, I think the more that you can have that conversation with students openly and walk them through that process, the more likely they are to buy in to what you’re asking them to do.*

***Stacey Johnson:*** *It occurs to me that that might be doubly important when that online platform costs so much money for them to access. They really have to understand that money is invested well.*

***Vivian Finch:*** *Yes! Exactly, and that it’s a crucial part of their learning.*

**Opportunity: Ensure student participation**

Instructors who really understand how students are using the online platform can develop guidelines and incentives for participation that ensure student success.

*Play this audio clip:* <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/Quote4.mp3>

***Lee Forester:*** *I just encourage everyone, if you want to use publisher materials, don’t just assume that students are practicing outside of class because there’s this online platform. They ignore it. You need to get in there yourself, see how it works, see where they’re learning, see what’s frustrating, and then evaluate whether it’s something you want to use or not.*  
***Bill VanPatten:*** *Right. And you also have to put the incentive in the course itself. The outside work for our class is 25% of your final grade because it is hybrid/flipped and there’s one hour gone. So, that one hour was 25% of the course, so 25% of your grade is this that you’re supposed to do outside of class. Not a problem. Students do it.*

**Opportunity: Anticipate the occasional problem**

Incorporating technology into our classes can improve our courses in many ways. However, the unexpected technical error or connectivity issue can be frustrating for instructors and for students alike. Over the course of the semester, there is a high likelihood that at some point, students will ask for extensions or do-overs. Since problems are likely to happen, designing room for those issues into the course can reduce stress and improve results.

–**Make sure instructors, TAs, and students all know where to find tech support.** Post the contact info on the syllabus or the online course site. Support for the textbook site is usually available through the publisher. For Blackboard related issues, you can contact [blackboard@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:blackboard@vanderbilt.edu).

–**Create a grading scheme for the online work that is flexible enough to account for likely scenarios, and then be firm in how you apply that scheme.** This practice leaves room for students to occasionally miss an assignment because of technical issues without fearing for their grade, while also being fair in execution.

–**Make sure students understand that issues sometimes happen.** Students should know they must start early and submit early. If the student’s home internet access is poor, provide information about alternate on-campus locations where connectivity issues will not be a problem.

*Play this audio clip:* <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/quote3.mp3>

**Paul Mandell:** *I have come across where students’ level of frustration about glitches or errors or answers that are incorrect, inaccurate, that they point that out. Now, I have told all of my students that in the event that an activity doesn’t work or that there’s an answer that they are concerned with, ‘send me an email message to that effect.’ But at the same time, to reduce that stress level, I’ve also told them, ‘and at the end of the semester, we’re going to add X percentage to that section. So, don’t feel that it’s going to be punitive to your grade.’ Because that is what they are reacting to more than anything else.*

**Justin White:** *I think that you’re going to have to create those exceptions anyways… because there’s a human component of it. And it could just be a simple human error that – ‘oh no I clicked submit by accident. Now I need to go back in but I already lost my three attempts. Now I’m worried about my grade.’ So, because the human element is always going to be there, you have to create some kind of window of exceptions or extra credit or free points or leeway or margin of error or whatever you want to call it, because the human aspect is always going to be there.*

For more discussion on digital textbooks and publisher-provided online learning platforms, check out episode 5 of the Vanderbilt’s [Leading Lines podcast](http://leadinglinespod.com/episodes/).

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Vivian Finch** is a former Assistant Director of the Center for Teaching and Senior Lecturer at Vanderbilt University

**Lee Forester** is a Professor at Hope College

**Paul Mandell** is an Associate Professor at the University of Houston-Downtown

**Justin White** is an Associate Professor at Florida Atlantic University

**Bill VanPatten** is a Professor at Michigan State University

[reative Commons License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)  
This teaching guide is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). Photo Credit: [Shadab](https://www.flickr.com/photos/70622758@N00/102056421/) via [Compfight](http://compfight.com) [cc](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/)