Jeff Anderson's Course Website FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Where is our course homepage?

For each of my classes, I host two separate course websites.

1. Content Homepage

   Math 105:   https://www.appliedlinearalgebra.com/blog/for-students/welcome-to-math-105
   Math 48A: https://www.appliedlinearalgebra.com/blog/for-students/welcome-to-math-48a
   Math 48B: https://www.appliedlinearalgebra.com/blog/for-students/welcome-to-math-48b
   Engr 11:   http://www.appliedlinearalgebra.com/blog/for-students/welcome-to-engr-11
   Math 1C: https://www.appliedlinearalgebra.com/blog/for-students/welcome-to-math-1c
   Math 1D: https://www.appliedlinearalgebra.com/blog/for-students/welcome-to-math-1d
   Math 2B: https://www.appliedlinearalgebra.com/blog/for-students/welcome-to-math-2b

   Each page features links to all content-specific resources. Here you can find links to:
   - Jeff's YouTube videos of class content
   - A downloadable draft textbook manuscript that Jeff used to create his YouTube videos
   - Lists of suggested practice problems (currently under development)
   - Laboratory prompts (also under development)
   - Example student work from previous courses at Foothill College
   - Useful articles, links, and other reference material to guide your learning

2. Course History Page (Spring 2022)

   Math 2B.02 (Mon/Wed @ 9:35am)
   Math 2B.01 (Tues/Thurs @ 7:30am)
   Math 48B.02U (Tues/Thurs @ 10am)

   Each page features links to all resources specifically for your learning experience this quarter. Here you'll find:
   - Links to resources organized by our in-class meeting dates
   - Links to daily learning activities
   - Links to student work from this quarter
   - Reports, results, and lessons from our quality control surveys
   - Resources created for and by our learning family this quarter

Why do we have two separate course websites?

Great question! When I was a younger teacher, I tried to host all course resources on a single website. This turned out to be a nightmare for me and proved to be hard-to-navigate for students. In winter 2021, my students and I developed the two-website model described here. It seemed to work better than my previous attempts using only one website. I plan to deepen my practice using these two websites for the rest of my career. I do this in consultation with my students and deeply appreciate your patience, guidance, and feedback. For a more direct answer to this question, I should describe the two separate types of information that previous students have come to rely on to guide their learning in our class.

First, there is the "content" of the course. This is what most students think about when they imagine college classes. The lectures. The assignments. Any resources to support the nitty gritty of learning class content. This type of material can be found on the *Content Homepage*. Such content exists independent of our work during a specific quarter. You might think about the Content Homepage like a textbook in a traditional classroom. Such resources are written by an expert and exist independent of any particular student, section, or quarter.

The second type of course resources are those that we co-create together as a learning community. These types of learning materials are hosted on our *Course History Page*. Think of this website as a historical record of our time together in this class. The resources found here are specifically tailored to our learning family this quarter. One of my goals as your teacher is to guide our team in creating a learning environment in which each member of our family is excited about and interested in contributing to the work found on this page. This is an extremely challenging task and I appreciate all the work you do for yourself and our community as we work towards this goal together.

How will we use CANVAS in this course?

I will actively minimize my use of CANVAS. In fact, I'm going to do everything in my power to help us spend as little time on CANVAS as possible. As discussed in our Grading FAQs document, you have complete control over the final grade you earn in this class. Yes, you read that correctly. No, I'm not shitting you. At the end of the quarter, you will tell me what grade you earned in this class. Whatever grade you decide on will be the final grade I submit to Foothill's Admissions and Records. This is the same grade that will show up on your transcript after this class is over.

Let me be very clear: this policy is NOT a get-out-of-learning-free card. Instead, I am making a conscious, informed choice to minimize our reliance on traditional approaches to assigning letter grades. In lieu of working towards a grade, I want to focus our collective energy towards engaging in continual learning cycles that feature feedback-rich, learning-focused, supportive dialog. To explore more about these grading policies, please read our Grading FAQs document. As we work together, I encourage you to cultivate curiosity about why I've structured the class in this way. The more you challenge my approach and work to figure out how these policies effect your learning, the better. Please share your questions, concerns, and feedback with our learning family as often as you feel is necessary.

Now, back to the original question: how will we use CANVAS? One of the ways I serve you in this class is to guide you through the process of making your decision on what final grade you feel makes most sense for you. Your work to assign your own final grade will include learning self-evaluations, your work on your learning portfolio, bi-weekly individual learning conferences, and two learning reflection essays that you submit throughout the quarter. You will also be responsible for constructing your own individualized learning portfolio to document your work to learn course content.

You will draft, edit, and refine this work to document your progress and show proof of your learning. All of this work will provide critical evidence that the learning you do in this class is meaningful and significant. Moreover, this work is designed to drive deep conversations between you (the learner), me (the teacher), and other members of our classroom community. I will be collecting all work in paper form and will not use CANVAS to collect assignments.

Why does Jeff minimize our use of CANVAS?

Another great question. Something you're going to learn about me (Jeff) is that I am all about empowering learners in my communities. I have spent over 12 years engaged in a deep academic study of the following questions:

1. What is learning?
2. How do people learn?
3. What is effective teaching?
4. How do I teach effectively?

The deeper I probe into these questions, the less faith I have in so many of the premises that undergird our education systems. An example of this type of independent thinking is seen in my approach to CANVAS.

One of my goals for my work in this class is to help you make the learning we do together meaningful and significant. The more I've learned about this goal, the more I've come to believe that learning doesn't happen on a 12-week schedule. If we are serious about empowering your learning in this class, we need to realize that your experiences and learning related to this class started way before we met each other. If we do good work together, you will continue the learning you do in this class for years after our class ends.

I've spent the many years developing what I believe to be high-quality, interesting, and engaging content to support your learning in this class. This includes YouTube videos and a draft textbook manual. I provide all these resources without a paywall[1]. As part of this effort, I believe you deserve access to all the materials I've generated to support you and all the work we do together as a team, even after the class ends. I take great pride in the many, many emails I get from previous students who transfer to transfer institutions (some who go onto Masters or Ph.D. programs) that tell me they still rely on my course materials and visit my course homepages years into the future. I see evidence of that these stories are true when I look at the data analytics pages on my Squarespace website: appliedlinearalgebra.com. And here we arrive at my some of my major problems with CANVAS.

First, CANVAS is designed to be a walled garden. It is nontrivial to create an open-access CANVAS page that gives visitors the same experience when they are members of the public versus actively enrolled in one of my courses. While it is possible to use CAVNAS like a public website, this type of engagement is not the primary purpose of CANVAS. Instead, CANVAS is designed to provide control to teachers, protect student records, and manage the logistics of the college education system. Those goals, while important, are not my central focus (Let me be quite clear: I will protect student records and follow FERPA rules judiciously).

My focus is on empowering student learning. To do this, I have come to believe that one of the best things I can do for my students is to provide open access to all the course learning materials and help each of my students develop sophisticated learning strategies so that you can continue to learn using these resources well into your future.

Second, CANVAS is designed to create online course content via a curated experience. Teachers have so much control over course layout, publication dates, content organization, etc. To be sure, there are some major advantages to this approach. One is decreased cognitive load. Teachers can and often do create CANVAS sites so that students can minimize the time they spend thinking about how to learn and can spend more time focusing on what they are learning. That approach is a great goal if my focus is to help you create a 12-week learning experience. However, one of my goals is to help you develop your identities as a sophisticated learner so that your learning continues beyond our 12-weeks together. Towards this pursuit, I am willing to increase your cognitive load and make you think harder about how to leverage our learning materials for your own learning.

Third, building a CANVAS site is labor intensive. I choose to focus my energies on building highly-engaging content. I estimate this project has taken me thousands of hours of work and cost me hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost income that I could have made by teaching overloads. However, I believe that my work on these projects is valuable for my students. Given that there are only 168 hours each week, I do not have the bandwidth to create the quality of content I believe my students deserve while also holding myself responsible for maintaining a CANVAS site.

Fourth, the entire grading apparatus on CANVAS buys into the letter grade system, lock, stock, and barrel. I have found ways to hack the grading systems on CANVAS to align more closely with my own philosophies of learning and assessment. But those processes are a headache that raise the hackles on my neck.

Finally, one of the practices that I feel passionately about is inviting students to bring their whole selves into our learning environment. As you'll see, I bring photos of my family with me to class and talk about my family often. I also ask my students about their loved ones and people they care about. This is part of how I build educational environments that invite both the learner and their communities to engage in collective learning.

I do a lot to encourage my students to challenge traditional teaching and learning practices. As my students explore their own beliefs and think critically about grades, learning, and school, inevitably some of the learning we do begins to undermine the assumptions and beliefs of other people in each student's learning communities. Over the years, many of my students have indicated that they want to share our learning resources with their family members and close friends to engage in dialog about what we are learning. Hosting content on CANVAS makes it much harder for this type of sharing and thus limits the type of conversations students can have with their larger learning communities.

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[1] With coaching from my students, I am getting better at inviting my communities to contribute to these projects on their own volition. I've had many people ask me how to support my work for future generations of learners. I'm still learning how to accept financial support from people who recognize the value of the work I do and want to contribute. If you'd like to learn more about this project, please check out my Patreon page for more information.