

# 2025 Learning, Teaching, and Technology Mini-Conference

## *“The Craft of Connection: Teaching in a Digital Age”*

Friday June 27, 2025

| Time         | Topic and Location   |   |  |
|--------------|--|---|--|
| 8:00 – 9:00  | <b>Registration and Breakfast (<i>Provided</i>): HP208/210</b>   |   |  |
| 9:00 – 9:15  | <b>Welcome:</b> <i>Chris Porter, Dean of Learning Resources, Virginia Western Community College</i>  |   |  |
| 9:15 – 10:45 | <b>The Compound Effect: Leveraging Generative AI and Learning Theories to ENHANCE Learning Facilitation</b><br><b>Keynote –</b> <i>Dr. Morris Thomas, Assistant Provost for Digital and Online Learning; Associate Professor of Educational Leadership &amp; Policy Studies, Howard University</i> |   |  |
|              | <b>Concurrent Session One<br/>HP343</b>  | <b>Concurrent Session Two<br/>HP345</b>   | <b>Concurrent Session Three<br/>HP418</b>  |
| 11:00 –11:45 | <b>The Canvas Credentials Advantage: Recognition, Skills, and the Workforce</b><br><i>Jack Szenderski &amp; Carolyn Kraut, Canvas Credentials</i>  | <b>Course Tune-Up: An Accessibility Check-Up for Your Course</b><br><i>Naomi Simpson, Laurel Ridge Community College</i>  | <b>Understanding the VCCS-EDLT Online Program Review</b><br><i>Nova Wright, Mountain Gateway Community College; Sheri Prupis, VCCS</i>                                       |
| 11:45-12:45  | <b>Lunch (<i>Provided</i>) – HP208/210</b><br><b>Update from VCCS AI Taskforce</b>   |   |  |
| 1:00–1:45    | <b>Accessibility Matters: Optimizing UDOIT Advantage to Make Your Canvas Courses More Accessible</b><br><i>Jen Leckie, Cidilabs</i>  | <b>AI as a Teaching Partner: Practical Strategies for Connection and Support</b><br><i>Michael Babcock Central Virginia Community College</i>                     | <b>Alternative Assessment: Assignments to Spark Deep Learning</b><br><i>Alissa Cruz, Blue Ridge Community College</i>  |
| 2:00–2:45    | <b>Accelerated Course</b><br><i>Nova Wright, Mountain Gateway Community College; Carrie Halpin, Lora Vasiliauskas, &amp; Casey Lofton, Virginia Western Community College</i>  | <b>Brainfuse Online Tutoring and Student Success</b><br><i>Karen Sanders, Brainfuse; Melissa Williams, Virginia Western Community College</i>                     | <b>Designing for Growth: Feedback Loops that Build Critical Thinking, Agency, and Resilience</b><br><i>Caryn Sever, Northern Virginia Community College</i>                  |
| 3:00–3:45    | <b>Exploring the Impact of Harmonize – Faculty Reflections on a Spring Pilot</b><br><i>Ivan Guajardo, Leah Savelyev, Tina Aaron, and Chris Porter, Virginia Western Community College</i>  | <b>Start Where You Are: Making Your Digital Content Accessible for All Students</b><br><i>Emily Scott &amp; Jordon Tucker, Virginia Western Community College</i> | <b>Unlocking Canvas: New &amp; Underused Features to Elevate Teaching</b><br><i>Erin Leftwich, Virginia Western Community College</i><br><b>**NOTE: HP341 (Computer Lab)</b> |
| 4:00         | <b>Closing Remarks – HP208/210</b>   |   |  |

# Session Descriptions

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS: 9:15 – 10:45

### **The Compound Effect: Leveraging Generative AI and Learning Theories to ENHANCE Learning Facilitation**

*Dr. Morris Thomas, Howard University*

This keynote speech addresses a comprehensive exploration of how AI tools can be effectively integrated into educational environments through the lens of established learning theories. Drawing from his pioneering E.N.H.A.N.C.E. Learning Model, Dr. Thomas will demonstrate practical applications of AI tools like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Microsoft Copilot that align with behaviorist, cognitivist, constructivist, and connectivist approaches to learning. Attendees will discover theory-informed strategies for maintaining academic integrity while embracing AI adoption in course design and delivery. Dr. Thomas will share insights on how educators can thoughtfully deploy AI as tools that complement rather than replace human instruction in the digital teaching and learning landscape.

*Dr. Morris Thomas serves as the Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning and Assessment (CETLA) and the Assistant Provost for Digital and Online Learning at Howard University. In addition to his administrative appointments, Dr. Thomas is an Associate Professor in the department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies in the School of Education and a Lecturer in the department of Information Systems & Supply Chain Management in the School of Business. Dr. Thomas has an extensive background in facilitating learning across modalities (in-person, hybrid-blended, Hy-flex, and online).*

*Dr. Thomas is an established scholar whose research focuses on instructional dynamics which encompass instructional domains, design, and delivery. He serves as an editorial board member for the Journal of African American Males in Education, the Journal of Innovative Higher Education, the American Research Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences, and as reviewer for the International Journal of Virtual and Personal Learning Environments. His scholarship has taken him throughout the continental United States, Canada, Cuba, Germany, India, Ireland, Malawi, Puerto Rico, and South Africa.*

## FIRST CONCURRENT SESSION: 11:00 – 11:45

### **The Canvas Credentials Advantage: Recognition, Skills, and the Workforce - HP343**

*Jake Szenderski, Canvas Credentials*

*Carolyn Kraut, Canvas Credentials*

Discover 'The Canvas Credentials Advantage' and how digital badges are transforming higher education by providing modern recognition for learners. We'll explore the value digital badges bring to institutions, particularly in validating skills. Learn how Canvas Credentials aligns with these principles and can directly support the VCCS 'Accelerate Opportunity' strategic plan by empowering your students with verifiable skills for workforce success. Join us to see how we can help your institution leverage the power of digital badges.

### **Course Tune-Up: An Accessibility Check-Up for Your Course - HP345**

*Naomi Simpson, Laurel Ridge Community College*

This session will explore practical strategies for enhancing course accessibility, starting with an introduction to the UDOIT/UDOIT Advantage tool. Discover how this tool can streamline accessibility checks within your course content. We'll also outline a comprehensive plan to review and update course materials, ensuring they meet accessibility standards and enhance learning experiences for all students. Whether you're new to accessibility initiatives or looking to refine your approach, this session promises insights and actionable steps to foster inclusive learning environments

### **Understanding the VCCS-EDLT Online Program Review - HP418**

*Nova Wright, Mountain Gateway Community College*

*Dr. Sheri Prupis, VCCS System Office*

This information session will include an overview of the VCCS-EDLT Online Program Review process and guidance for those interested in serving as future reviewers. The VCCS-EDLT platform supports all 23 Virginia community colleges in conducting consistent and collaborative external reviews of fully online asynchronous degree and certificate programs. Designed to ensure high standards of academic quality and student success, the platform offers resources such as a centralized dashboard for review requests and reviewer applications, detailed evaluation rubrics, a project history, and a comprehensive FAQ section—all aimed at promoting continuous improvement in online education across the Commonwealth. A question-and-answer period will be allotted at the end of the session for anyone who may have questions.

## **SECOND CONCURRENT SESSION: 1:00 – 1:45**

### **Accessibility Matters: Optimizing UDOIT Advantage to Make Your Canvas Courses More Accessible - HP343**

*Jen Leckie, Cidilabs*

Discover how to harness the full potential of UDOIT Advantage to create more inclusive and accessible Canvas courses. This practical session will walk you through the tool's key features, offering actionable strategies to identify and fix common accessibility issues efficiently. You'll leave equipped to build a better and more equitable learning experience for every student.

### **AI as a Teaching Partner: Practical Strategies for Connection and Support - H 345**

*Dr. Michael Babcock, Central Virginia Community College*

In an age where human connection must coexist with digital fluency, AI can serve not as a threat but as a teaching partner. This session offers two practical strategies for using AI to extend support, personalize learning, and foster deeper student engagement. We'll explore how ad-hoc GPTs can target specific academic skills with immediate, tutor-style feedback, and how Google's *NotebookLM* can empower students to generate their own AI-powered study environments from course materials. Designed for classroom instructors and teaching faculty, this session emphasizes human-guided use of AI to enhance — not replace — the craft of connection.

### **Alternative Assessment- Assignments to Spark Deep Learning - HP418**

*Alissa Cruz, Blue Ridge Community College*

As artificial intelligence continues to reshape education, traditional assessments may no longer fully capture student learning or promote academic integrity. We have all experienced a shift as AI is assisting students with

their work. This session will introduce the concept of alternative assessment and explore its benefits in today's evolving classroom. Participants will learn practical strategies for getting started with alternative assessments, along with creative and effective examples to inspire implementation. Whether you're new to this approach or looking to expand your toolkit, this session will help you reimagine how assessment can foster deeper learning and engagement in an AI-influenced world.

### **THIRD CONCURRENT SESSION: 2:00 – 2:45**

#### **Accelerated Learning in Action: Designing, Delivering, and Evaluating 7-Week Courses - HP343**

*Nova Wright, Mountain Gateway Community College*

*Dr. Carrie Halpin, Virginia Western Community College*

*Lora Vasiliauskas, Virginia Western Community College*

*Casey Lofton, Virginia Western Community College*

After a full year of implementing 7-week accelerated courses, what insights have emerged about designing, teaching, and supporting student success in this fast-paced format? In this session, we will share practical course design techniques used to adapt content, assessments, and engagement activities to a condensed timeline. We will share key insights from faculty who have designed and taught in the condensed format, including the challenges they faced, the strategies that worked, and lessons learned along the way. We'll also present comparative data on student success and retention rates between 7-week and traditional 16-week courses, highlighting trends and takeaways that can inform future planning.

#### **Brainfuse Online Tutoring and Student Success - HP345**

*Karen Sanders, Brainfuse*

*Melissa Williams, Virginia Western Community College*

An overview of the Brainfuse student features, including on-demand one-to-one assignment help, personalized asynchronous and live writing assistance, as well as a suite of academic tools available for independent student use will be shared. Attendees will understand the resources available to students, including how to direct them to assistance within the platform, review current usage patterns at Virginia Western, as well as have any questions addressed about the service. Opportunities to incorporate the Writing Lab and Brainfuse writing experts into a syllabus or curriculum, as well as best practices for students, will also be discussed.

#### **Designing for Growth: Feedback Loops that Build Critical Thinking, Agency, and Resilience - HP418**

*Caryn Sever, Northern Virginia Community College*

This presentation explores a structured, multi-tiered feedback model that supports student growth through iterative learning. Designed for online and hybrid courses, the model integrates rubric-based assessments, peer and instructor feedback, and self-reflection to improve both academic performance and workforce-relevant soft skills such as critical thinking, agency, and resilience. Attendees will learn how the feedback loop structure fosters metacognition and supports student success over time. Early research findings and practical implementation tips will also be shared.

## **FOURTH CONCURRENT SESSION: 3:00 – 3:45**

### **Exploring the Impact of Harmonize – Faculty Reflections on a Spring Pilot - HP343**

*Dr. Ivan Guajardo, Virginia Western Community College*

*Leah Savelyev, Virginia Western Community College*

*Tina Aaron, Virginia Western Community College*

*Chris Porter, Virginia Western Community College*

This panel brings together faculty who participated in a spring semester pilot of Harmonize, an innovative learning tool integrated with Canvas designed to enhance student engagement through rich, interactive discussions. Panelists will share their experiences implementing Harmonize in a variety of course formats and disciplines. Discussion will explore how the tool influenced teaching practices, improved student interaction, and supported inclusive and multimodal communication. Faculty will also reflect on challenges encountered during the pilot, lessons learned, and recommendations for broader adoption. Whether you're curious about new ways to increase student engagement or are considering incorporating Harmonize into your own courses, this session offers practical insights and real-world perspectives from your colleagues.

### **Start Where You Are: Making Your Digital Content Accessible for All Students - HP345**

*Emily Scott, Virginia Western Community College*

*Dr. Jordan Tucker, Virginia Western Community College*

By April 2026, all Virginia Western Community College (VWCC) institutions must comply with ADA Title II and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA. These standards require that digital content is accessible to all users, including those with disabilities. For many faculty and staff, meeting these requirements can seem overwhelming—especially when they're unsure of where to begin. This session will break down the "why" and the "how" of the new Title II Guidelines, helping participants understand the impact of accessible course design on student success and how to start making their digital content WCAG compliant. Representatives from Virginia Western's faculty and the Office of Disability Services will share practical strategies, real-world examples, and user-friendly tools to make this process manageable. Attendees will leave this session with a clearer understanding of accessibility standards and the confidence to begin making their courses more inclusive—one step at a time.

### **Unlocking Canvas: New & Underused Features to Elevate Teaching – HP341 (Computer Lab)**

*Erin Leftwich, Virginia Western Community College*

The Canvas LMS is constantly evolving—but are you using its full potential? In this interactive session, we'll explore some of the newest features released in 2025, including Discussions Checkpoints, Enhanced Rubrics, and the new Block Editor for Pages. We'll also spotlight powerful but often overlooked tools like New Analytics and Group Collaborations. Whether you're teaching online, hybrid, or face-to-face, this session will offer practical strategies to streamline your workflow, improve student engagement, and make Canvas work smarter for you. Participants will leave with actionable tips, resource links, and a renewed sense of what's possible in their courses.