

INTRODUCING ONLINE COMPONENTS TO A CLASS: HOW TO INCREASE THE LIKELIHOOD OF SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

This workshop will be a forum for discussion and idea exchange. The focus will be finding solutions to the challenges presented when online components of a course are introduced for the first time to students. The presenters will discuss an effort currently underway to implement online course enhancements and tips for increasing the likelihood that students will be receptive to online instructional components. There will also be an exchange with attendees.

INTRODUCTION

Online discussion and chat capabilities are growing in popularity in modern college and university courses. The use of such technology can provide many benefits to students and faculty. For students, technology can be a useful aid in group assignments by allowing group members to exchange ideas and even have a group “discussion” via chat capabilities. However, students who are accustomed to traditional course approaches may not enthusiastically embrace these technology enhancements initially. This workshop will provide a forum for an exchange of ideas and insights about how to introduce online course materials to students to increase the students’ acceptance and potential use.

WORKSHOP FORMAT

The workshop will consist of a short presentation by the authors, as discussed below, followed by a facilitated discussion of the topics introduced in the presentation.

One of the presenters recently began implementing online discussion, chat, and lecture review components in his classes. The technology is similar to those commonly seen for course management. The courses require group projects and one course uses a team simulation that has student teams competing to manage a firm in the same industry. The students have to make weekly decisions in the simulation. The common complaint heard from many students assigned to group projects is that their schedules make it very difficult to meet as a team. The use of online discussion and chat capabilities is potentially one way to alleviate some of that concern. However, when it became apparent that students were not exploiting the opportunity

provided by the technology, the faculty member realized that some “up front” preparation was probably necessary.

The second part of the presentation will focus on the research of one of the authors into the question of how to effectively implement collaboration within online course environments. The workshop will present 18 tips developed from that research as the starting point for the discussion. Those tips are given below.

The discussion will focus on at least the four questions below.

- What additional strategies have faculty used to successfully implement online courses, or course components?
- What are some of the obstacles faced in the implementation of online courses—administrative and instructional?
- What are the sources of student resistance to online course materials and components in?
- To what degree does student experience with online course influence their acceptance or resistance to online tools?

18 TIPS FOR SUCCESSFULLY INCLUDING PEER COLLABORATION IN AN ONLINE COURSE

The following is a set of heuristics that can assist you in successfully incorporating peer collaboration into your online college course.

Get Rid of Preconceptions - Prior to beginning the design of the online collaboration activities, abandon any preconceptions regarding which types of exercises cannot occur online.

Adapt and Adopt Existing Collaborative Exercises - Rather than creating new and original online peer collaboration exercises from the beginning, exercises can be developed initially by referencing previous classroom collaborative activities that proved successful and adapting those exercises for use online.

Begin with a Manageable Amount of Collaboration - To provide optimal learning experiences for the students, incorporate a few well-planned exercises when first including such activities.

Receive Student Feedback on Collaboration Exercises - In addition to a general course evaluation, ask students for feedback on each peer collaboration exercise, particularly those that are newly implemented. Use the comments received from

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the students to adjust, abandon, or confirm the use of the exercises.

Encourage Student Collaboration - Encourage student efficacy with peer collaboration by first making collaboration a stated outcome of the course. Collaboration, participation, and communication expectations must be written into the syllabus.

Teach Students How to Collaborate - Provide students with information and tips on how to interact with classmates, problem solve, constructively criticize, divide and assume responsibilities, organize their work, manage their time, and provide an end product that is seamlessly representative of the collaborative efforts of the group.

Consider a Course Orientation - Though including a face-to-face orientation for an online course is not an option in some cases, an initial session to introduce the course can be beneficial to the online student. If a face-to-face course orientation is not an option, an initial course content module can be designed to present that information.

Organize the Student Groups - Organization of the online student groups should not be made the responsibility of the students because of issues of procrastination to complete the task and gravitation towards those who are familiar or similar.

Create Groups of 3 - 5 Students - When groups contain more than five students, they become unmanageable. In large groups, “lurkers” are able to not participate, “slackers” are able to unduly benefit, and “controllers” are able to dominate the discourse. Groups of two may not fully allow the students learn the skills of group consensus gathering and problem solving.

Stabilize the Groups Throughout the Course - Student groups should be formed as early in the semester as possible to allow the students to become familiar with their groupmates and consequently promote ease of communication within the groups.

Instruct Groups to Report Large Problems - During the peer collaboration exercises, students should be allowed – and expected – to solve internal problems. However, students should be informed that irreconcilable problems should be reported to allow an intervention to occur that would enable project work to progress.

Constantly Facilitate and Monitor Online Collaboration - At no time during the course can the students be on autopilot. Since physical and verbal cues cannot be obtained from the students, facilitation and monitoring are the only ways to know that they understand the concepts that are being provided.

Provide Feedback Often - Prior to tests and finals, students should receive feedback on how well they understand the course information.

Carefully Choose Discussion Topics - When preparing discussion topics for the groups, choose interesting and controversial topics to elicit discourse.

Prepare in Advance for Chatroom Discussions - First, be organized for chatroom discussions. Make the chatroom topic and any associated questions available to the students at least three days prior to the exercise. Instruct the students to prepare questions and comments regarding the topic to help facilitate the flow of conversation during the exercise. Next, to promote student involvement and activity, give grades for substantive participation in the chat discussion and inform the students of the grading structure prior to the chats. During the chatroom session, facilitate the discussion. Finally, if the chat session was

considered productive, make the archive of the discussion log available to the students for future reference.

Organize the Discussion Board for Productive Discourse - Because of the volume of traffic that the discussion area can generate, it is important to provide a great deal of structure in this area. First, create an exhaustive list of topics that might be discussed during the course and create headings for each of those topics in the discussion area. Instruct the students to post messages under the appropriate topic heading on the discussion board. Next, make the students aware of the rules and etiquette for posting a message to the discussion area. Third, instruct the students to place questions on the discussion board and encourage other students to respond to the message if they have an answer. Finally, the discussion board should be monitored frequently throughout the course.

Monitor the Discussion Board During Peer Collaboration Exercises - When conducting group exercises that require the use of the discussion board, organizing and monitoring are important processes. Remind the students that posted discussions are designed to replace the classroom discussions and that contribution will be graded. Make certain that students are aware that they will receive a grade for both posting substantive messages and responding to the postings of others. The requirements for initial postings and responses promote two-way communication. During the peer collaboration exercise, visit the discussion areas to make certain that the students remain on track with the concepts and on task with the assignment.

Promote Peer Collaborations Through Grading - In addition to the overall group grade for an exercise, be certain to require the students to individually submit their work to ensure that everyone will have something to contribute once the groups meet. Conclude the exercise by having the students complete a group evaluation.