



MAGNA ONLINE SEMINARS

Online Group Work: Making It Meaningful and Manageable

Thursday, August 12, 2010

2:00 PM – 3:00 PM (Atlantic)
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11:00 AM – 12:00 PM (Mountain)
10:00 AM – 11:00 AM (Pacific)

Presented by:

B. Jean Mandernach, Ph.D.



Today's presenter:

B. Jean Mandernach, Ph.D. is associate professor of Psychology and Research Associate for the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Park University. Jean received her Ph.D in social psychology from University of Nebraska at Lincoln and has spent the majority of her career studying the scholarship of teaching and learning. As a full-time telecommuter teaching undergraduate psychology courses online, time not spent in the virtual classroom is dedicated to research on enhancing student learning through assessment, innovative online instructional strategies, evaluation of online faculty, fostering student engagement and the promotion of critical thinking.



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Online Group Work: Making It Meaningful and Manageable



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Online Group Work:
*Making it
Meaningful & Manageable*

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Our presenter



B. Jean Mandernach, PhD
Associate Professor of Psychology and Research
Associate for the Center for Excellence in
Teaching and Learning at Park University

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Overview

- ▶ What is the value of group work in the online classroom?
- ▶ How can online instructors effectively implement collaborative work?
- ▶ How do instructors increase students' "buy in" for virtual team activities?



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Poll

- ▶ Do you use group projects in your online classroom?
 - ▶ Yes
 - ▶ No

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Poll

- ▶ What is your biggest challenge with online group projects?
 - ▶ Grading
 - ▶ Supervising
 - ▶ Designing assessments
 - ▶ Student attitudes
 - ▶ Asynchronous nature of interaction
 - ▶ Other: _____

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Value of Group Work

- ▶ Research indicates three distinct benefits to collaborative learning:
 1. effort to achieve
 2. positive relationships
 3. psychological health



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Theoretical Underpinnings

- ▶ Cooperative learning theory:
 - ▶ Social interdependence theory
 - ▶ Students share common goal; learning impacted by actions of group
 - ▶ Social cognitive learning theories
 - ▶ Learning through direct/indirect observation, imitation & modeling

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Theoretical Underpinnings

- ▶ Cognitive-developmental theories
 - ▶ Cognitive conflict creates cognitive disequilibrium to stimulate learning
- ▶ Behavioral learning theory
 - ▶ Highlights role of imitation, group reinforcement & social exchange

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Cognitive Benefits of Group Work

- ▶ Increases in:
 - ▶ Learning, retention & critical thinking
 - ▶ Persistence, commitment & time on task
 - ▶ Curiosity, transfer & meta-cognitive thought



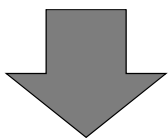
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Key to Collaborative Learning

- ▶ Group members promote each other's success by (Johnson & Johnson, 1989):
 - ▶ Exchanging resources and information
 - ▶ Giving and receiving feedback from group members
 - ▶ Mutually influencing each other's reasoning
 - ▶ Engaging in interpersonal skills needed for teamwork

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Group Work in Online Classroom

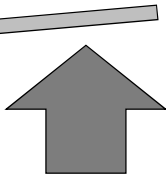


Challenges in the online classroom:

- Scheduling
- Pace
- Attitude

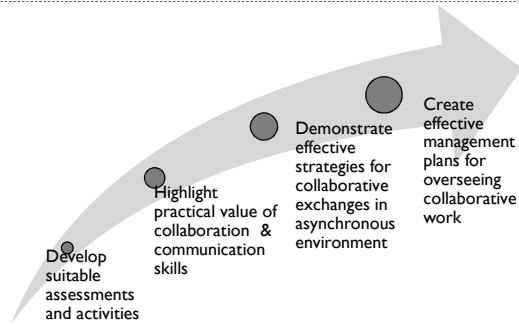
Benefits of collaborative learning:

- Cognitive advances
- Communication skills



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Overcoming Barriers



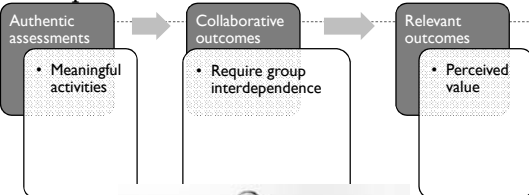
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Group Activities

- ▶ Assessment or activity must be uniquely suited to collaborative learning strategies:
 - ▶ When activity is structured **cooperatively**, students' goals are positively correlated; students believe they can reach their goals if & only if others in the group also reach their goals. Students seek outcomes beneficial to all those with whom they are cooperatively linked.

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Group Activities in the Online Classroom



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Designing Collaborative Activities

	No “right” answer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Debate• Controversial issue• Research critique
	Multiple perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Case study• Current event analysis• Cultural comparison
	Lots of resources available	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Informational overview• Concept integration• Research analysis

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Sample Authentic Assessment

- ▶ *Research critique:*
 - ▶ students critically analyze methodology, findings and conclusions of empirical studies
- ▶ *Case study:*
 - ▶ students assimilate theoretical knowledge and practical understanding to create a detailed analysis
- ▶ *Current event analysis:*
 - ▶ promote social responsibility through application of course principles to current events

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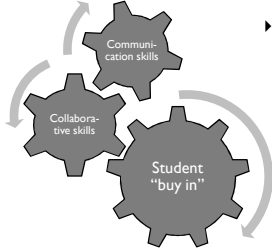
Reflections & Applications

- ▶ Think about your course(s):
 - ▶ What types of assessments do you use for group projects?
 - ▶ What assessments/activities can be adapted to be authentic assessments for collaborative learning?



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Value of Collaborative Strategies



▶ Students need to be convinced that **processes** in collaborative learning are as valuable to their goals as the content of the project.

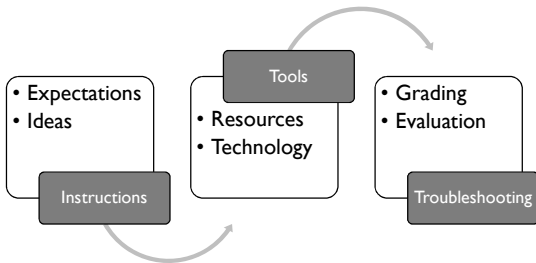
For new entrants with a four-year college diploma, applied skills are the top five "very important" skills in combined ranking with basic knowledge and skills.

Rank	Skill*	Percent
1	Oral Communications*	95.4%
2	Teamwork/Collaboration*	94.4
3	Professional/Think/Observe*	92.5
4	Written Communications*	91.1
5	Critical Thinking*	90.8
6	Problem Solving*	89.7
7	Writing in English*	88.7
8	English Language*	88.0
9	Reading Comprehension*	87.0
10	Ethics/Social Responsibility*	85.8
11	Leadership*	81.8
12	Information Technology Applications*	81.0
13	Quantity/Reasoning*	81.0
14	Self-Direction*	78.3
15	Quantity*	71.8
16	Mathematics*	64.2
17	Science*	33.4
18	Foreign Languages*	21.0
19	Government/Economics*	18.8
20	History/Geography*	18.1
21	Humanities/Arts*	15.2

“Are They Really Ready To Work?” Employers’ Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce”

- Employers seek applicants who can document experience & success in
- **professionalism/work ethic**
- **teamwork/collaboration**
- **communication skills**
- **critical thinking/problem solving**
- Key to success: tech savvy & lifelong learning skills to adapt to change.

Provide Guidance on HOW to Collaborate



Tips for Collaborating Asynchronously

DO

- ▶ Provide additional time
- ▶ Communicate early
- ▶ Utilize range of collaboration tools
- ▶ Provide a team “workspace”
- ▶ Be aware of time zones

DON'T

- ▶ Rely exclusively on private communications
- ▶ Divide tasks & work independently in parallel
- ▶ Overuse synchronous tools
- ▶ Change teams frequently

Poll

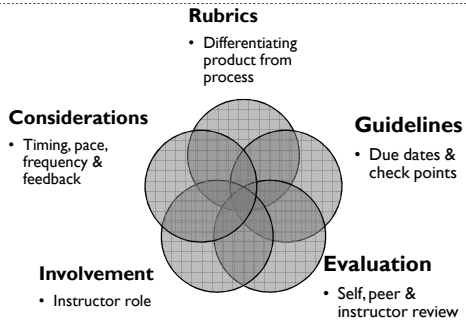
- ▶ Does your learning management system provide a mechanism for coordinating student group work?
 - ▶ Yes
 - ▶ No

Web 2.0 Technology to Facilitate Asynchronous Collaboration

- ▶ Tokbox
 - ▶ <http://www.tokbox.com>
- ▶ VoiceThread
 - ▶ <http://voicethread.com>
- ▶ Creately
 - ▶ <http://creately.com>
- ▶ Google docs
 - ▶ <http://docs.google.com>
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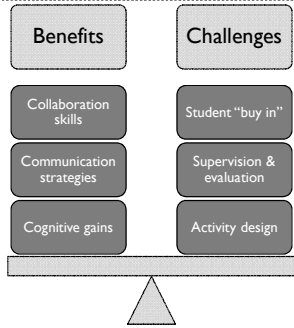


Managing Online Group Work



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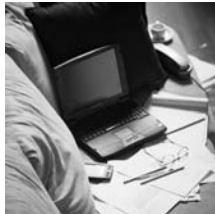
Final Thoughts



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Questions

- ▶ Contact information:
 - ▶ B. Jean Mandernach, PhD
 - ▶ Professor, Psychology and Online Learning
 - ▶ Park University
 - ▶ Jean.Mandernach@park.edu



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Thank you for attending

We would like to hear from you! Please consider completing an evaluation form found at:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/081210>

Cognitive Benefits of Collaborative Student Work:

- Increases in:
 - Learning
 - Retention
 - Willingness to take on difficult tasks
 - Persistence
 - Epistemic curiosity
 - Continuing interest in learning
 - Commitment to achieve
 - Long-term retention
 - Higher-level reasoning, critical thinking, and meta-cognitive thought
 - Creative thinking and process gain
 - Transfer of learning
 - Positive attitudes toward the tasks being completed
 - Time on task

Key to Effective Collaborative Learning:

- Group members promote each other's success by (Johnson & Johnson, 1989):
 - Giving and receiving assistance
 - Exchanging resources and information
 - Cognitive benefits from
 - orally explaining, elaborating, and summarizing information
 - teaching one's knowledge to others
 - Giving and receiving feedback from group members
 - Challenging each other's reasoning
 - Advocating increased efforts to achieve
 - Mutually influencing each other's reasoning and behavior
 - Engaging in the interpersonal and small group skills needed for effective teamwork
 - Processing how effectively group members are working together

Sample Authentic Assessment Ideas for Collaborative Tasks

In real-world contexts, individuals rarely work in isolation; rather, groups work together toward related objectives and outcomes. As such, authentic group tasks may provide a more realistic assessment of the ability to work collaboratively to apply skills and concepts to solve complex problems.

Ideas:

- *Debate* - Debates allow students to weigh the pros and cons of an issue by examining the validity of the evidence presented. Debates encourage higher order reasoning through the critical evaluation and comparison of empirical data.
- *Controversial issue* – Controversial issues provide an opportunity for students to compare scholarly evidence on issues for which there is no definitive correct outcome. Controversial issues integrate a range of perspectives to allow students to form a final conclusion based on an evaluation of facts along with one’s personal values and opinions.
- *Research critique* – Research critiques encourage students to critically analyze the methodology, findings and conclusions of empirical studies. Research critiques allow students to become more effective consumers of empirical literature.
- *Case study* – Case studies provide an opportunity for students to assimilate theoretical knowledge and practical understanding to create a detailed analysis of an individual, group or event.
- *Current event analysis* – Current event analyses promote social responsibility through application of course principles to enhance students’ understanding of the world in which they live.
- *Cultural comparison* – Cultural comparisons encourage perspective-taking, critical thinking and evaluation of media information. In cultural comparisons, students are asked to select an event and compare the media reports of that event from a range of cultures or backgrounds; this information is integrated to gain a more complete understanding of both the event and the relevant cultures.
- *Informational overview* – Informational overviews require students to investigate a topic for which a large amount of literature is available; students must collect, analyze, and summarize the information to create an informational report to teach others about the topic.
- *Concept integration* – Concept integration assignments are designed to show the connection between theories, disciplines or individual concepts. Students are required to investigate the target concept from a range of disciplines, perspectives or theoretical orientations to determine trends in understanding and/or gaps in the literature.
- *Research analysis* – Research analyses require students to integrate the available literature on a target topic to identify future trends, questions and studies. Research analyses allow students to apply research methodologies to plan future studies based on the current state of information.
- *Brief Investigations* — Brief investigations typically measure mastery of basic concepts via the ability to interpret, describe, hypothesize, explain, or predict future relationships. Brief investigations go beyond the recall of knowledge to emphasize the ability to manipulate basic information in novel settings.

Guidelines for Creating an Authentic Assessment:

1. *Identify standards* - Standards should be meaningful with real-world applicability.
2. *Develop learning objectives* - Learning objectives should identify specific, measurable components of the broader standards.
3. *Identify target performance or skills* - Generally, authentic assessments promote activities requiring higher order cognitive skills.
4. *Develop performance criteria* - Performance criteria should be clear, concise, and openly communicated to students.
5. *Create scoring rubric* - A detailed, clear scoring rubric provides guidance for students as well as ensuring consistent, fair grading procedures.
6. *Design instructional activities* - Instruction should directly guide students toward desired performance.
7. *Implement authentic assessment* - Assessment should be a reiterative process of applying knowledge, understanding basis for knowledge, and demonstrating relevant skills. Quality authentic assessments emphasize both process and product. Authentic assessments should include opportunities for self-assessment and revision.

Sample Online Group Assignment – Controversial Issues Debate

The controversial issues debate is an in-depth investigation of a controversial topic relevant to the field of psychological testing. We will be examining three different controversial issues; one will be presented each week during weeks 4 through 6. You will work in groups to create a persuasive argument in support your assigned side of the controversial issue. Your group will need to decide the format that you will use to present your side of the debate to the rest of the class; in the past, groups have used PowerPoint presentations, Wikis, webpages, written documents, multimedia presentations and videos... the format of your debate presentation is entirely up to your group. You will post your argument (or a link to your argument) in the threaded discussion for each issue. In addition, your group is responsible for the rebuttal discussion to defend your position.

Controversial Issues Presentations:

- At the end of Week 1, I will divide the class into small groups (approximately 3 or 4 people) and assign each group to either the "pro" or "con" side of each of the controversial issues. The group teams will be posted as an announcement and emailed to you.
- Each group will work together on the controversial issue to provide compelling empirical evidence to support your assigned side of the controversy.
- All controversial issue presentations will take place in the designated discussion thread.
- During your assigned presentation, your group must work together to provide one persuasive, informational presentation that will be posted to the relevant discussion thread. This may be a page of written text, a PowerPoint presentation, an online video, or any other creative way of conveying your information. The information you provide does not have to be lengthy as long as it contains relevant information and is expanded to clearly explain your position. You are required to utilize and correctly reference five (5) quality, academic sources to support your position. You should use correct APA style in formatting your debate information.
- The groups assigned to the controversial issue must post their persuasive information by Thursday at midnight.
- Finally, everyone in the class should read the controversial issues and post their own position. When responding to the issues, you just need to write whether you support the "yes" or "no" side of the controversy with a sentence or two highlighting why you support that position (due on Sunday by midnight). You do not have to agree with the side of the controversial issue that you were assigned to represent.

Sample controversial topics include:

- Is intelligence a function of a generalized ability (g-factor) that underlies most intellectual and mental functioning?
- Should standardized test scores be utilized as a basis for determining school/teacher effectiveness (particularly in relation to standards set forth by the "No Child Left Behind" Act)?
- Are projective tests a valid measure of personality?

Key considerations:

- While there is no "right" answer to these types of controversial issues, there is a body of research that either supports or refutes each side of the position. You should incorporate research into your response.
- This is a persuasive argument, not just an opinion. Your personal opinion may differ from the position that you are assigned to research and represent in the thread; this is fine, just be sure that you still create a persuasive argument for the assigned topic.
- I encourage you to be creative in your presentation of information. You are not limited to simple written text. You can use attachments or links to include a range of visual, audio or internet sources. Challenge yourselves to represent your information in a creative, meaningful, interesting fashion. If you need ideas, please feel free to call or email and I will be happy to discuss your project with you.
- Because this project requires group work and research, **START EARLY!** Do not wait until the last minute as it can be time consuming to work in groups in the online environment. The groups are assigned at the beginning of the term; you should immediately make contact with your group members and start researching your controversial issue.

Sample Introduction to Gain Student Support for Online Group Work

There is a plethora of research examining skills that employers are seeking from recent graduates. The article “*Are They Really Ready To Work? Employers’ Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce*” reports that consistently employers seek applicants who can document experience and success in **professionalism/work ethic** (i.e., taking responsibility for the completion of tasks; time management; working productively with others), **teamwork/collaboration** (i.e., working with diverse groups; working collaboratively from a distance), **communication skills** (i.e., oral, written, and technology-mediated), and **critical thinking/problem solving** (i.e., analytical and applied thinking). Key to success in all these areas is the assumption that one is technology savvy and has the life-long learning skills to continue to adapt to the changing face of electronically-mediated communication.

Highlighted in this article is that one of the key skills sought after in the 21st century graduate is the need to be “global, instant and in constant communication;” as well as the ability to be a functional member of long-distance teams. Employers want individuals who are adaptable, responsive and have effective technology management.

In the group project this week, you have the opportunity to fine-tune your skills in this area. In addition, successful completion of this online group project serves as a viable source of evidence for your professional credentials that you have mastered some of the skills sought after by the “21st century employers.”

For new entrants with a four-year college diploma, applied skills are the top five “very important” skills in combined ranking with basic knowledge and skills.

Rank	Skill	Percent
1	Oral Communications*	95.4%
2	Teamwork/ Collaboration*	94.4
3	Professionalism/Work Ethic*	93.8
4	Written Communications*	93.1
5	Critical Thinking/ Problem Solving*	92.1
6	Writing in English	89.7
7	English Language	88.0
8	Reading Comprehension	87.0
9	Ethics/Social Responsibility*	85.6
10	Leadership*	81.8
11	Information Technology Application*	81.0
12	Creativity/Innovation*	81.0
13	Lifelong Learning/ Self Direction*	78.3
14	Diversity*	71.8
15	Mathematics	64.2
16	Science	33.4
17	Foreign Languages	21.0
18	Government/Economics	19.8
19	History/ Geography	14.1
20	Humanities/ Arts	13.2

Basic and applied skills rank ordered by percent rating as “very important.”
 Number of respondents varied for each question, ranging from 382 to 409.
 * Indicates an applied skill

Sample Instructions to Teach Students HOW to Collaborate Asynchronously

Tips for working in online groups:

- The value of a group activity is that you can bring together a variety of ideas and perspectives to create a stronger document than any group member could create individually; as such, it is important that you work together with your group members to complete this activity. You should NOT simply divide the tasks and never communicate with your other group members again.
- When collaborating with your online group members, I suggest you devise a strategy that is amenable to the asynchronous nature of this course. Generally, it is NOT your most effective approach to attempt to arrange synchronous conference calls or online meetings (although, if you would like to utilize this approach, you are more than welcome to – I have just had past students report greater success with asynchronous interactions).
- I recommend a cyclical "divide-conquer-converge" approach to working in groups. In other words, you should: 1) get together to discuss the task and divide responsibilities, 2) each person works on their assigned portion of the task, and 3) get back together as a group to integrate your findings. From here, the cycle starts again as you look for gaps in your work, discrepancies in your findings and/or areas that need additional information – then you can divide the tasks, work independently and converge again to assess where you are at with the overall project goals. This cycle continues until you are finished with your project.
- When you are working with others in the online environment, there are a range of communication strategies. The easiest and most direct option is email (or phone), but there are many other avenues for communication. Within our course, your group has a private threaded discussion that you can use as a workspace; you can also use the course "chat" feature and the group dropbox. Beyond the tools available in our course, the Internet offers a host of options to facilitate group interaction. See the "Online Collaboration Tools" folder for more information on these tools.
- If you choose to utilize any synchronous interactions to prepare your project, make sure you discuss what time zone everyone is located in so that you are all available at the same time.
- Communication is essential. You will need to work diligently to communicate with your group members to ensure an integrated, thorough and complete final project.

Web 2.0 Applications to Facilitate Online Group Work

Application	Link	Cost	Description
<i>Tokbox</i>	http://www.tokbox.com	Free	Video chat with up to 20 people or send video messages. You can also share videos, presentations, and documents or have a normal text chat.
<i>VoiceThread</i>	http://voicethread.com	Depends on usage level	**Group conversations (using voice, text, audio file, or video) are collected and shared in one place from anywhere in the world.
<i>Mindjet Catalyst</i>	http://www.mindjet.com	Free 30 day trial / \$25 per month per user	**Teams can visually connect ideas, information and people to save time, improve processes and drive innovation – whether you are driving the sales process, managing a meeting, conducting a meeting, or simply getting organized.
<i>Creately</i>	http://creately.com	Free / \$4.95 per month / \$9.95 per month	**An easy to use online diagramming application that's built for collaboration. Powerful features and an intuitive interface makes it ideal for teams working together on diagrams & designs.
<i>Eyejot</i>	http://www.eyejot.com	Free	**Eyejot is the first, comprehensive, client-free online video messaging platform ideal for both personal and business communications. It offers everyone the ability to create and receive video messages in a self-contained, spam-free environment.
<i>SlideShare</i>	http://slideshare.com	Free	**Upload and share your PowerPoint presentations, Word documents and Adobe PDF Portfolios. Share publicly or privately. Add audio to make a webinar.
<i>SlateBox</i>	http://www.slatebox.com	Free	**Markup ideas on embeddable "slates" and collaborate in real-time. You can build a slate in under 1 minute and embed it on your own blog or website in a snap.
<i>Google Docs</i>	http://docs.google.com	Free	Create or upload documents, spreadsheets and presentations and store them online. Share items with others and collaborate in real-time.
<i>Edublogs</i>	http://edublogs.org	Free / Pro available	**Edublogs lets you easily create & manage student & teacher blogs, quickly customize designs and include videos, photos & podcasts - it's safe, easy and secure

Application	Link	Cost	Description
<i>Weebly</i>	http://education.weebly.com	Free	**Easily create a classroom website & blog, manage your students' accounts, and accept homework assignments online
<i>Empressr</i>	http://www.empressr.com	Free	**Tell your story anyway you like. Add photos, music, video, and audio, and share it publicly or privately in an instant.
<i>Teambox</i>	http://www.teambox.com	Free	**A place for your team in Twitter-like project collaboration tool. Share tasks, messages, files. Get notified by email. Real group collaboration for your projects!
<i>Edmodo</i>	http://www.edmodo.com	Free	**A private social platform for teachers and students to share ideas, files, events and assignments.
<i>280 Slides</i>	http://280slides.com	Free	**Create beautiful presentations, access them from anywhere, and share them with the world. There's no software to download and nothing to pay for – and when you're done building your presentation you can share it any way you like.

Checklist for Creating and Implementing Online Group Projects

<i>Preparation</i>	
	Students understand the value of both the process and product of the collaboration.
	Students have guidance concerning how to work in an asynchronous team.
	Group size is small enough to allow for full participation of all members.
	Course provides numerous opportunities for community building prior to group projects.
<i>Assignment</i>	
	Assignment is an authentic measure of student learning.
	Assignment will benefit from collaborative work
	Students have clear guidelines of the expected outcome of the collaborative assignment.
	Assignment creates a structure of positive interdependence in which individuals perceive that they will succeed when the group succeeds
	Assignment is scheduled to allow adequate time for preparation and communication
	Assignment is designed in a manner to allow students a level of personal control
<i>Technology</i>	
	Students are provided with tools and instructions to facilitate online communication.
	Each group has a collaborative workspace within the online course.
	Students have technology skills relevant for asynchronous communication
	Back-up procedures are in place to deal with technology failure
<i>Evaluation</i>	
	Grading and/or evaluation strategies differentiate between the process and the product.
	Strategies are in place to monitor interaction processes
	Clear grading rubrics are provided at the start of the assignment to guide student work.
	Self and peer evaluations are included in the process to monitor individual involvement and accountability

Sample Rubrics for Students' Self-Evaluation of Collaborative Processes

Part I: Evaluate the overall group experience.

Category	Beginning 1	Developing 2	Accomplished 3	Exemplary 4
Cooperation	Work was done independently by each person with little collaboration	Most work was done collaboratively with regular exchange of information	All members contributed to an integrated final product	Each member contributed fully based on unique skills or resources; ongoing collaboration
Distribution of Workload	Not all members participated	Everyone participated; some members failed to contribute fully	All members participated equally	Distribution of workload and resources was done collaboratively based on skills
Leadership	No group leader	Leadership roles rotated throughout the project	Group leader was identified and provided initial guidance	Group leader provided guidance and support throughout project
Communication	Limited communication	Initial and final communication but little interaction in between	Repeated communication throughout project	Ongoing communication and feedback among group
Respect	Members were rude or disrespectful	Members were indifferent to the opinions and perspectives of others	Most interactions were respectful and appropriate	All were courteous and valued each other's opinions

Part II. Use the following section to evaluate each member of your group.

Category	Beginning 1	Developing 2	Accomplished 3	Exemplary 4
Conflict	Conflict was evident throughout interactions	Individual was source of conflict	Individual avoided conflict	Individual actively worked to reduce group conflict
Assistance	Contributions were insignificant or nonexistent	Contributed some toward the project	Contributed significantly but other members contributed more	Completed an equal share of work
Effectiveness	Work performed was ineffective	Work performed was incomplete	Work performed was useful	Work performed contributed significantly to the final project
Attitude	Rarely had a positive attitude	Usually had a positive attitude	Often had a positive attitude	Always had a positive attitude
Readiness	Rarely participated	Sometimes participated	Almost always participated	Always participated fully

Focus	Rarely focused	Focused on the task with prodding of group	Focused on the task most of the time	Consistently stayed focused
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Strategies to Maximize Learning in Online Groups

To maximize student learning and satisfaction with online group assignments, instructors should:

1. *Facilitate learner readiness for group work and provide scaffolding to build skills.*
 - a. sequence activities within the course to build on previously learned skills
 - b. position small group activity later in the course
 - c. teach the necessary skills for effective online collaboration
 - d. create multiple opportunities for community building
 - e. provide guidance on interaction standards, tools and literacy skills
 - f. ensure comfort with necessary technology/communication skills
2. *Establish a healthy balance between structure (clarity of task) and learner autonomy (flexibility of task)*
 - a. provide guidelines for team member performance in conducting the group project
 - b. ensure that the task is achievable, sustainable, and properly timed within the course
 - c. make the purpose and parameters of group tasks and the learning goals clear and explicit
 - d. allow students flexibility, such as choice of group membership, member roles or specifics of the topic
 - e. provide students a component of personal control over the task (content, process, intentions, goal setting, consequences, outcomes, group partners)
3. *Nurture the establishment of learner relationships and sense of community*
 - a. establish a sense of community within groups early in the course
4. *Monitor group activities actively and closely*
 - a. be available for feedback, general information, and private counsel
 - b. intervene as required to keep discussions on track, help students stay focused on the task, assist with relationship building, and provide
5. *Make the group task relevant for the learner*
 - a. allow learners flexibility to pursue topics according to mutual interests
 - b. encourage co-creation of knowledge
 - c. integrate authentic, real-world environments and relevant content
 - d. enable students to control and direct their learning to the greatest extent possible
6. *Choose tasks that are best performed by a group*
 - a. engage students in tasks that benefit from teamwork
7. *Provide sufficient time*
 - a. Include time for scheduling, planning, and organizing
 - b. Provide adequate time for discussion and exchange of ideas

Brindley, J. E., Walti, C. & Blaschke, L. M. (2009). Creating effective collaborative learning groups in an online environment. *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning*, 10(3), 1-18.

Discussion Questions to Further Thought about Online Group Work

1. What barriers do you face in implementing online group work? To what extent are these barriers a function of the delivery mode (online) compared to the traditional challenges inherent in group projects?
2. What is your student population? What unique considerations are necessary for designing group work based on your student population characteristics?
3. What tools do you have available in your course management system to facilitate asynchronous interaction? Does your institution support other tools that may enhance online collaboration?
4. To what extent will the pace of your online course influence the number and type of group projects required of your students?
5. How might you adapt one of your current assignments to be an authentic assessment that requires group collaboration?
6. How can technology support the implementation of online collaborative learning?
7. Can asynchronous cooperative learning produce learning benefits equivalent to face-to-face group work?
8. Research shows that online students are often less supportive of group assignments than face-to-face students. What strategies might you use to overcome this resistance and gain online students' support of collaborative activities?
9. How do you balance the evaluation of process versus product in grading collaborative group work? What strategies might you integrate to prevent social loafing in your online groups?
10. How do you balance student control and flexibility in the online groups with your need to manage the course and maintain learning objectives?

Recommended Resources and Readings

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JULY 2010

Listening to the Questions They Ask (Embedded in the Questions They Ask Are the Real Issues Students Worry About)

By James R. Keating, EdD

Everyone is connected to the Web and wired into easy communication with friends, co-workers, neighbors, even strangers—coast to coast, around the world. Distance learning is a perfect extension of this technology, but even so, some students are intimidated by online study, even afraid of it. Three years ago I had a student, one of the best in her high school class, who told me she hadn't completed an online college-credit course because she was afraid of the "system," which she thought was too anonymous and impersonal. Online instructors have to be able to spot such worries and spot them early, and then help students overcome their fears.

This can be tricky. Problems, like people, are all different. How do you know when a student is intimidated? And how do you know *what* worries him or her? How do you know which students need what kinds of help?

How do you do it? *Listen to the questions they ask.* The questions students ask often tell you the real problems that have to be addressed.

- **Higher-order questions.** These questions demonstrate that the student already has a good grasp of academic content and is trying to find ways to develop this knowledge into deeper understanding. Moreover, this student is confident in the online environment. Give encouragement and ask reflective questions. Request that the student analyze, synthesize, and evaluate academic content. Push the student to even higher levels of achievement by way of ongoing engagement.
- **Content-specific questions.** You really have to interact with this student because content questions are calls for information. Probably in many cases, this information *could have been found* in the text or electronic resources. You have to wonder why the student didn't find it. Was it lack of interest or insufficient time to do the work properly? Was it due to reading problems or was the student confused about the assignment or procedure? On the other hand, the student may be trying to

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TIPS FROM THE PROS

Ways to Improve Course Accessibility

David Wood, IT Access Coordinator for Dallas County Community College District (Dallas TeleCollege) suggests the following preliminary steps to make an online course accessible:

- Make sure all pictures and graphics have a textual description via an "alt tag."
- Make sure that the course is easily navigable to assistive technology.
- Make sure all videos used are captioned and have a transcript available.
- Provide information that is to the point and absent of superfluous information. This way persons who are blind using screen readers don't have to navigate a lot of information that is not necessarily useful as well as persons with learning disabilities who have difficulty in processing information.
- Use a template and stick to it. When a person who is blind uses a screen reader they must first read a web page to get an idea of how the page is set up. If a website is not organized then it is much harder for a person who is blind to navigate.
- A lot of designers love Flash.

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Online Student Collaboration—Getting Buy-in, Overcoming Obstacles

The ability to work collaboratively is an important skill for students to develop. Having students collaborate successfully begins with getting their buy-in and providing adequate resources and support. In an interview with *Online Classroom*, Jean Mandernach, associate professor of psychology and online learning at Park University, talked about the importance of having online students collaborate and strategies to help them succeed.

OC: What are some reasons for including group work in online courses? What are the potential benefits?

Mandernach: There's proven value to collaborative learning that goes beyond what anyone can do alone. I don't think that part's unique to online learning, but I think it's important that we remember that there are some real advantages to the social learning theory idea that we can learn and retain more information when it's done as a collective group and when students are teaching each other and learning from each other. That value is independent of the fact that it's online. The part that makes it really valuable for the online classroom is when you combine the content issue with the skills they develop from this. Many employers and graduate schools really view online learning as learning in isolation, and I think it's important for students to show that they are capable of collaborative work, that they can work independently and with others. And it's really where the workforce is moving.

OC: How do you convince students of the value of working

together when they're busy and are not necessarily interested in learning in a group?

Mandernach: Many times I think group work is presented as an assignment with no justification. Students immediately respond, "I'm an online learner. I took online courses because I can't meet synchronously and because I don't have time to work with others." Online students seem to be more resistant to group work than traditional students, based on their schedules, which is why they're taking online classes in the first place. I think the first oversight of many instructors is not directly addressing that issue. Tell students, "I realize that you may see this as a barrier, and here are the potential barriers inherent in this kind of assignment." And then say, "Here's why I'm requiring it." Talk to students about the fact that they do need to have these collaborative skills and that this provides a way for them to show concrete evidence that they are able to work with others and communicate effectively.

Many students are resistant to group work because they simply don't have a grasp of how to do it in an online environment. When they think of group work, they immediately think face-to-face or telephone-based meetings. So the first task is getting their buy-in, to show that this is an important, valuable thing to do, and talking to them about the skill sets that they can obtain from that.

Second, give them the how-to tools so the group process doesn't become overwhelming to them. Teach them how to work asynchronously in a group. Show them the

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tools that might make that easier. Talk to them about strategies. Walk them through times, processes, and procedures.

OC: What sort of tools have you found to be successful for student collaboration?

Mandernach: There are often tools built into the course management system that can be valuable. For example, Blackboard has a host of group features that allow group chat sessions, group discussion boards, and private collaborative areas. Sometimes the technology is there, and it's just a matter of knowing that it's available in your learning management system.

Web 2.0 has also opened a whole new set of tools that are available, and most of them are free. I don't think we need to think of group projects as being restricted to emails and discussion boards. There are so many opportunities now built into the learning management systems, as well as those that are independent of the learning management systems. I tell students to start with their goals and then ask which tools are available that meet those needs.

OC: What role do you recommend for instructors in group work?

Mandernach: It's important to be active in the process primarily because students are navigating both the process and the content. I think the instructor needs to provide the resources and knowledge to students to help them collaborate. But then it's important in the online environment that instructors check in with students periodically to make sure that they are not experi-

encing technological glitches and to make sure that the communicative strategies are in place.

I often ask the students how it's going for them and just get feedback from them on the process of learning in a group. I don't necessarily think that instructors should be really involved, because that kind of defeats the purpose of student-to-student learning and collaborative learning, but I think that instructors should be actively involved in making sure students know they're there to help with the process. If there is anything they need in terms of technological guidance or communicative guidance, the instructor is there with available resources and tools. But I also think it's important that the instructor doesn't get too involved. That would defeat the whole point of student-to-student interaction and student-to-student learning. Part of that is navigating through the process and working with others to figure out the rules. I don't think instructors should be overly involved in telling students who should do what and how they should do it; instead, they should really be serving more as a sounding board and guide to make sure that the process is moving along. Let the students be active in determining how they're going to implement their process.

OC: What should instructors do when problems arise in groups?

Mandernach: I think the most common problem by far is social loafing, the same problem we have in face-to-face groups. The complaint that you will hear most often is "So and so has not responded to our emails." I have a rubric for students to evaluate

themselves in the process as well as provide an anonymous evaluation of their peers.

Thus far the technology has not really seemed like much of a barrier. Most students are knowledgeable enough about the basic technology and are willing to learn the necessary technologies, particularly after you get their buy-in. They almost seem eager to learn it once they realize collaboration is a valuable skill to have.

Having rubrics in place that allow you to gauge whether or not social loafing occurred and letting students be involved in the evaluation helps.

*On August 12, Jean Mandernach will lead the Magna Online Seminar **Online Group Work: Making It Meaningful and Manageable**. For information, see www.magnapubs.com/calendar/451.html. @*

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However, Flash is often difficult to make accessible. I recommend that if designers use Flash to communicate information that they have a textual equivalent that can serve as an alternative format.

- Faculty should work with their disability services office to determine if a student who has a disability may need additional time on an exam to account for the amount of time that it will take for that student to either access the information or process it depending on their particular disability. @

PowerPoint for Online Courses, Part 4: Explaining Images

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

Although there are plenty of other tools to use for creating online content, PowerPoint is widely used. So it's important to use it well.

Images are the “show” in show and tell

The purpose of images, in *all* instructional materials, is to support learning by *showing* what is being discussed. And showing can be very powerful. For example, here are some image types I discussed in last month's article:

- Models, examples, and representations
- Qualitative and quantitative relationships
- Changes over time
- Hidden concepts

These images may be static (still, for example pictures and charts) or dynamic (moving, such as animations). They *show* what you are talking about and often make it easier for students to *visualize* the topic and *notice* what may not be obvious. For example, if you are looking to buy a home, a link to a map that *shows* exactly where each property is located on that map provides a lot more information, in a format that is easier to understand, than a paragraph describing the location of the property. Images showing spatial relationships are much easier to understand (and retain) than a textual explanation of these relationships.

What about telling?

So images are good for showing. But what about the explanation that goes along with the images? The answer to this question is a bit more complex than you might imagine.

Images (especially complex images such as maps, screenshots, and models) can increase cognitive load. Cognitive load is the degree of work imposed on working memory (which is extremely limited). When working memory is overloaded, learning is reduced and the student is often frustrated. So when you are using images, you need to take some steps to reduce *unnecessary* cognitive load.

Some cognitive load is beneficial in that it pushes students to use brain processes that help them learn. An animation showing cell division may require the student to stop and start the animation before proceeding, in order to think about the structures and what is happening. This type of cognitive load is actually *needed* for learning.

Once you add an explanation, whether it is textual or via narration, you have increased cognitive load because students now need to deal with two things at once—the image and the explanation. But this additional cognitive load is often needed to understand the image. So you should make the explanation as easy to deal with as possible.

Mayer's (2001) comprehensive research on multimedia and learning provides two important principles (Table 1) for improving learning and reducing unnecessary cognitive load when explaining images on the screen.

- **Modality principle** Students learn better from complex images or animations and *narration* than from animation and *on-screen text*.
- **Spatial contiguity principle** Students learn better from related text and images when related text and graphics are presented *next to each other*.

Table 1. Principles that influence the effectiveness of image explanations (Mayer)

If you are showing appropriate images on your PowerPoint slides and want to explain them, Mayer's principles point out that we should ideally explain them in narration rather than text (modality principle). This is because having to go back and forth between the image and the explanation is difficult. But if a text explanation is used, the text must appear next to the image.

Like Mayer, human factors researchers make it clear that we need to present related media elements together. They also recommend that for dynamic images, we make it possible for students to control the playback of the images so they can start and stop as needed. That helps students focus on an image without it changing.

Good explanations

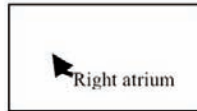
Aside from using narrated explanations—when possible—to go along with your images, and making sure that any text explanations appear on the *same* slide as the image, there are other things you can do to provide good explanations for images on your PowerPoint slides.

The first is simple: don't read the slides. I explained why you shouldn't do this in a previous article in this series so I'll just repeat it here.

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If you are explaining a screenshot, map, or other complex image, it helps students to know where to focus on the screen. Annotations that show students where to focus are often helpful (and reduce unnecessary cognitive load). For example, consider placing an arrow with a callout to point to the part of the image you are explaining, as shown in the graphic below.



Rather than show one complex image and discuss the entire image in a long monologue on one slide, consider showing the image on multiple slides but using a box to focus attention on a different part of the image in subsequent slides, as shown below.



When explaining images, it improves learning if you encourage students to *think* about the image rather than to passively receive an explanation. For example, ask students a question about the image and provide the answer on a subsequent slide. Or ask them to post an answer in the discussion forum.

References:

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Patti Shank, PhD, CPT, is a widely recognized information and instructional designer and writer and author, who helps others build valuable information and instruction. She can be reached through her website: www.learningpeaks.com. @

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engage *you* in a conversation, which would be a good thing. So which is it...a problem or an opportunity?

The goal with this student is to keep the conversation going. The questions you ask must be those that require the student to actually *use* materials. That is, they should be application questions that require understanding of facts, not just knowledge of them. If a student cannot reply appropriately, then chances are good that he or she is struggling, and knowing this, you can work to understand and respond better to help this student succeed.

- **Process questions.** This student is puzzled and is really asking for you to do some hand-holding. He or she is lost...and it may not be due to challenging content. Maybe the student doesn't know how to move around in the electronic environment; how to use important program features; or how to submit materials,

questions, or attachments.

The “process questioner” can take a lot of your time because he or she doesn't really know how to use the system and might be trying, without success, to submit materials, join chats, or otherwise navigate the online environment. Depending upon the program involved, this may require some reteaching, which may or may not be your responsibility or area of expertise. Nevertheless, it is important because this student will soon become discouraged and take a negative attitude, saying essentially, “This is too hard; no one can help me—I can't do it.” So it is important to identify this issue quickly and then address it before the student becomes a dropout.

- **Silence.** This is a problem. The student who is essentially silent, asks nothing, and communicates little is hard to know. Is this silence because the student is brilliant or bored...or is it something else? How can you tell? Sometimes this student is

doing just fine, but sometimes is struggling without knowing why. You don't know either.

Do everything possible to start a conversation. Ask questions, directly, *addressing the student by name*. Ask the student to ask questions in return. It's hard to do this in an online setting because students are not sitting in front of you in a classroom. But you cannot know these students until they speak, and only when they do will you know how to address their needs.

It may seem strange, since teachers are used to *asking* questions, but one of the best ways to help in the online classroom is to listen to students ask *theirs*. What they ask can tell you what help or encouragement they need and what will help them best succeed in the electronic classroom.

James R. Keating is an English instructor at Butler University in Indianapolis. @

You Want to Be a Hotshot Online Instructor? Here's How!

By Errol Craig Sull

Online teaching thrives because online learning thrives...and the appetite to take online courses only continues to grow. More folks will be entering the online teaching field, and if you want your school to recognize you as a “keeper”—i.e., one who is a true asset to the school—and if you want other schools to be more than just interested in hiring you, it's necessary to come across as an online instructor who can obviously make a class the great learning experience it should be, can give the school a recognized scholar or expert in his or her field, and is motivated and dedicated to everything that the school is about. Do these and you'll stand out, for sure. But getting to this level has several components that must be embraced—here they are and here's how:

Be sure to follow all rules, regs, and policies of the school. Every school offering online courses has a plethora of rules, regs, and policies; these are general for all who teach and specific for the class(es) you will be teaching. When you “break the law” and someone has to step in, correct you, take up some of his or her time doing so—you will be remembered for this, and not in a way in which you want to be remembered. Two tips: (1) Either print out or copy and save all of these items so you'll always be on top of them, and (2) when you don't understand something, immediately ask your supervisor; being proactive in this area is a good thing, as it shows that you want “to get it right.”

Timeliness is crucial in all phases of online teaching. Your school has certain requirements as to when assignments must be

returned; when—and how often—you must post to discussion (and possibly chat); the time frame for responding to student emails, webmails, and other queries; and when various other class postings must be made. Certainly, follow these—period. But beyond this you should be early, when possible, in returning, posting, and responding; students will really appreciate this, and it will be reflected in your student evaluations, which your supervisor will read.

Give assignment feedback that is thorough, detailed, and positive. Students are in your classroom to learn, of course, and thus you must adopt an attitude of teaching them not merely for a grade but rather to prepare them to incorporate the subject far beyond your classroom. Thus, assignment feedback—from major ones to weekly discussions—must be detailed and thorough so students can truly learn from you as their online instructor; you want to give the students input they can use once your course has ended. And always be positive, upbeat, and helpful in your feedback: these tell the students you do really give a damn.

Establish a good communication relationship with your supervisor. Your supervisor carries significant weight in terms of your role as an online instructor: class assignments, recommendations, contract offerings, extra assignments, and/or spreading the word about you to others at the school are some of the major areas in which a supervisor can impact your career. Beyond giving your all in the class, maintain constant communication with your supervisor; give him or her an occasional progress update; ask

questions when clarification is needed; and share especially good or interesting moments of the class. You cannot simply walk into this person's office to chat or have coffee, thus communicating by computer (and phone) is the only method you have for your supervisor to get to know you as an in-depth, caring, and dedicated online instructor (beyond what is evident in your classroom), so do stay in touch!

Always be more than just a minimal presence in the classroom. In so many ways you become the face of the class—you bring it to life, and when you are not to be seen there is a dullness, a quiet, a disconnect that sets in. When this happens the students become less engaged and less motivated for all aspects of the class—never good. So be here, there, and everywhere in the class; when the students see your name on a constant basis in discussion, in general announcements and/or emails, and in any other areas of the course, it is reassuring to them. It shows you want to be there, that they can depend on you. Your supervisor will see this, and your students will remember this in their evaluations.

Keep your enthusiasm and motivation to teach obviously high. If the students sense your excitement and motivation for teaching then they will take with them some of your enthusiasm—they will want to be involved in the course and they will enjoy learning from you. And if you take the time to post additional resources in your course—ranging from cartoons to videos to articles to general information—this announces that you like

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being in the class and teaching your subject. Schools expect their online instructors to be motivated and enthusiastic—but when they find one who is, and on a constant basis, well, that online instructor is a true asset.

Become a noted expert in your field. An online instructor must have at least a master's degree in some field of education: this is the minimal requirement to teach online at most online schools. Yet you want to go far beyond this, and one way is to dive deep into your field: publish (books, and in journals, newspapers, blogs, and newsletters), give lectures, become an “expert” for TV or radio shows, do groundbreaking research. Becoming more recognized in your field certainly does not translate into becoming a better online instructor, but it does tell the school (and your students) that rather than being a minimalist just looking to make a few bucks, you are a major player in your subject—and this always helps a school's reputation.

Attend online workshops and webinars; get involved in school Listservs and discussions. Online schools often offer online workshops and webinars for their faculty; when required be sure you attend, of course, but when not required do attend at least some, and on a regular basis. Additionally, many online schools establish discussion topics and Listservs for all faculty and/or faculty teaching a specific course or in a particular department—be sure you immerse yourself in all of these, including offering your suggestions, insights, and experiences. All of these—workshops, webinars, Listservs, and discussions—give

you the opportunity to have others know you as one who is truly dedicated to the school and your students, always crucial.

Volunteer to assist in any capacity. The operative word here is “volunteer”—you are not looking for any remuneration (although in some cases it will be offered). Helping with course development, mentoring newbie online instructors, contributing to a school newsletter, establishing a discussion thread (that offers additional info or suggestions related to a course)—these things and others will show that you want to be part of the school, want to help the school grow, want to assist other instructors. These are all positives, certainly, and spotlight you as a dedicated and enthusiastic online instructor far beyond the course(es) you teach.

Continually upgrade your education. No matter the level of your terminal degree, never sit smugly on it, for new developments, new strategies, and new discoveries in your field happen on a daily basis. Thus, seek out more formal education, if possible; attend professional conferences; join professional associations (related to education and your field(s) of study; subscribe to, participate in, and read journals, newspapers and newsletters, books, and blogs that focus directly or indirectly on your field. And this information must be shared with “the powers that be” at your school so they know you can always be depended on to have the latest information and abilities related to your teaching area.

REMEMBER: Emmy-winning TV stars, Oscar-winning movies, Pulitzer Prize-winning books, and Nobel laureates don't just

happen; a great deal of work, time, and commitment go into making the best...the best.

Please let me hear from you, including sending along suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at errolcraigsull@aol.com. And remember: please forward me your computer tips and suggestions to make teaching in the online classroom more efficient and productive.

Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 15 years and has a national reputation in the subject, both writing and conducting workshops on it. He is currently putting the finishing touches on his next book—How to Become the Perfect Online Instructor. @

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Some might argue that the students who demand instructor presence in the online classroom should then sign up for a traditional class instead of an online class. But online students are mostly students who will otherwise not register for a traditional on-campus course. Most online students are single parents, people whose job requires a lot of travel, or individuals who have substantial family obligations but still want to advance in their careers. If we want to cater to this student group, we need to adapt our online delivery techniques to their needs.

Satarupa Das is an associate professor of economics at Montgomery College in Takoma Park, Md. @

Increasing Instructor Visibility in Online Courses through Mini-Videos and Screencasting

By Satarupa Das, PhD

Online education is gradually becoming an integral part of how education is being delivered. I have been teaching online economics courses (mostly undergraduate courses) for the last seven years. As online courses offer flexibility to students, most of whom will not sign up for a traditional classroom, educational institutions have jumped in to offer online classes to capture this untapped category of nontraditional students. However, not all online classes are successful. What are the needs of students in an online environment?

In my experience, in order to be successful an online class needs to be lively. It should not be just a collection of PowerPoints, reading materials, and assignments. One way to enliven the class is to integrate multimedia material—such as interactive exercises and/or audio-video materials relating to the subject matter in the classroom. No doubt, there is a lot of material on the Web that can be appropriately used to enrich the class. I use a lot of that material myself to connect real life to textbook economics. I have also created Web-resource websites (www.montgomerycollege.edu/~sdas/webresource) to achieve this.

However, the most important way to enliven the class is to bring instructor visibility to the classroom. One of the fundamental criticisms about online education has been the lack of a teacher's presence and the ability to interact with him or her. Both traditional educators and students have alleged that students miss out on the benefits of a teacher's presence in the classroom, including lectures, interaction, oral

explanations, and feedback. As a result, critics contend that online education is inferior to face-to-face classroom teaching. Announcement tools, discussion tools, and chats are traditional tools to achieve instructor presence in the classroom. However, new technology is providing us with better tools to empower the human teacher in the online classroom.

Since I realized that my students liked my announcements, discussion comments, etc., very much, I tried to add some more of "me" into the classroom. This past year, I started making videos and adding them to my class. Since there are no dedicated media personnel at my school to help with this, I started making them myself with a simple flip camera. I uploaded them to YouTube and then used the embedding code from YouTube to put in a file in the WebCT class management system. I now have an instructor's introduction video in which I introduce myself to the students and set the expectations of the course, much in the same way that I do in my traditional classroom. I added a few more to explain certain key concepts of the subject. I am careful to keep the videos very short—mostly under three minutes. I think this is long enough for students to feel my presence and yet short enough to fit into their attention span. It seems to me that this venture is successful since I have received requests from some students to make more of these videos. I plan to add these short clips to every weekly module.

I have found another very easy way to add some instructor visibility in the online classroom: screencasts. Even though technology in general requires some learning time,

I have seen that the learning time for screencasting is unbelievably short—15 minutes and a little experimentation were all that was needed to get me started. I use free downloadable software from TechSmith called Jing (www.jingproject.com/), which allows the created file to be saved in a .swf format or in screencaster as a link that can be easily shared in email or announcements. The file created can be a single image or a video. In economics, I have to explain a lot of graphs and tables, and these are more easily explained and understood using a screencast than if the explanations are presented in a written format.

Essentially, a screencast works for me as follows: I pull out a graph and while I mouse over it explaining the different parts of the graph, the software captures my voice and the movement of the mouse on the screen. Jing recordings can be up to five minutes, which is actually an advantage since most students will listen to mini-lectures more attentively than they would hour-long lectures. The recordings can be uploaded easily to play in my class management system.

The new tools of video and screencasting not only add instructor visibility but also offer other pedagogical benefits. I think they can take away some anxiety from some online students, especially the newcomers. They are suitable for visual and auditory learners. They give students a chance to get some fundamental concepts clarified with the help of the instructor. Also, students can watch the video clips as many times as needed, which increases their engagement.

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