30 Ideas in 30 Minutes – A Lively Discussion about On-Line Learning

Getting to know your students

One of the first discussion activities should be an ice-breaker activity or an introduction activity. These can be as simple as giving name, job or degree program, and location; or can include a fun activity such as explaining a favorite food, place to visit, most memorable experience, etc., something that facilitates the students getting to know each other beyond name and location. The instructor should start this out by posting his or her own biography or introduction first. The students will use the instructor's post as a model to follow for their posts. The instructor should follow up by responding to each student's introduction and welcoming them to the class,

During the first couple of weeks of the semester, the instructor should respond to each student at least a couple of times, if not more. This helps the student connect with the course and the instructor and has been shown in research to increase the chances of the student having a satisfactory and successful learning experience.

In my housing class, I have students use the WebCT homepages where they have to put a picture of their house and what they like about it. This is a great discussion mechanism for many of the topics we cover in the class. The WebCT homepage function is easy to use, and many of the students can cut and paste a copy of their student apartment or dorm if they don't have a picture of their parental home to upload or scan.

Discussion

Grade for both quantity and quality of posts.

Define quality substantive posts (i.e. combine at least two of the following: introduce new ideas you are thinking about, give sources if idea is not your own, pose questions for peers, refer to a posting by a peer and add substantive comments to it, refer back to material from class, etc.)

Your role as an instructor in a discussion is to respond to each small group, offer feedback, pose further questions to consider, and respond privately to students who need more substantive posts

Discussion Activities that work well on-line:
- ➢ Debate - critics post views, defenders post views, go to opposite side & look for inaccuracies, inconsistencies & irrelevant statements, make counterargument, take position & write reflective paper

- ➢ Case Studies/Role Playing - create a scenario to illustrate the topic, perform a virtual play, students act out their character/stakeholder roles, afterwards set up new discussion threads for students to post comments in their characters' voices about why they behaved as they did or to react about their new levels of understanding based on taking on roles

Set up small discussion groups of 7 or so group members, depending on the size of the class, so they can have more focused discussions by reading only a small number of posts before posting themselves.

Define your expectations for discussion: Clearly state the frequency, quality and timing of communication expected for the class. Define grading scheme as well as how discussion counts towards the final grade.

Employ active learning techniques: Encourage students to use critical thinking and reflection in their discussions to create a collaborative learning environment.

Ask the right questions: Design high level questions (e.g., that are thought provoking, evaluative, make comparisons or predictions, etc.)

Ask questions right: Do not ask many questions within one message; but post a separate message for each question to create a dialog rather than a monologue.

Create a team atmosphere: If using discussion teams, have students take "ownership" of their team (e.g., have members come up with a team name or give the team a task to accomplish)

Discussion can be accomplished through asynchronous discussion boards or through synchronous chat. Chat is not very manageable or effective for large group discussion. Limit chat use to small group or team 'working' sessions, if they want to use it. Otherwise all discussion activities can be carried out effectively with discussion board postings.

Group work on-line

Because collaboration is facilitated in an on-line environment, consider assigning group papers in lieu of individual papers. It is important to teach the collaborative process and specifically assign responsibilities to group members to promote full participation of all involved. Some possible ideas for roles are 1) group moderator who is responsible to encourage participation and contribution of all group members, 2) rough draft writer who is responsible to get the ideas down on paper, 3) editor who is responsible to prepare the final document, and 4) group auditor who is responsible to report the participation of group members based on the teacher's criteria. Consider assigning multiple papers and keeping the same group members together so each person has opportunity to perform each role.

Divide the students into small groups or working teams. A variety of activities can be accomplished online in small groups, such as collaborative assignments, sharing and peer-review of written work, discussion questions with the leader posting the team response to the main discussion, and study groups. Set up a separate discussion area for each team, or at least a separate discussion thread, for them to work in. Instructor can monitor, but should not be an active participant in this process.

Communicating effectively with students on-line

In an on-line environment students will likely generate more written work than in a traditional face-to-face environment. Consider staggering assignment due dates, students with last names A-H on Day 1, I-P on Day 2, and Q-Z on Day 3, for example. This helps to keep grading time manageable. Rotate the due dates among the groups throughout the semester to vary who turns in work on Day 3.

The instructor's postings will set the tone of the course. In order to encourage a sharing of ideas, the tone may need to be a bit less formal. Even though APA or MLA formatting is required for written papers, requiring this format in online postings discourages the type of

conversational tone needed for good online discussions. Even though the tone may be informal, the common rules of Netiquette, spelling and grammar should be applied.

Sometimes there will be a 'problem' that arises between students or with one student. Deal with problem behavior through email, by phone, or in person (if logistically possible), but not in the discussions.

Use weekly or bi-weekly Check-in postings to stay connected to your students. The check-in can be short and simple, no more that three open-ended questions such as: What is one thing you learned this week (or over the past two weeks)? What is one thing that is still muddy or unclear? What questions do you still have about the content, course, process, anything? You'd be amazed at the valuable feedback you will get from your students that you can use for continuous course improvement, adjustment of course materials or facilitation, or to spot the students who need extra help.

Exams

Give a non-graded "exam" before the graded exam so students have a chance to practice taking exams online. This helps students be more comfortable using the technology before they are asked to demonstrate their mastery of course content.

Offer students the option of using a non-ISU testing site such as those listed with the Illinois Virtual Campus (http://www.ivc.illinois.edu/). Students arrange to take the exam at the non-ISU site. Students submit an assignment during the first few weeks of the course that identifies the following information about the selected proctor site: site, name of proctor, e-mail address, and phone number.

Use password-protected exams. Via email, you send the password to the non-ISU (student selected, instructor approved) site at least seven days prior to the scheduled exam. Request verification of receipt by the proctor within your email.

Identify at least two sequential days for taking each exam as students may have face-to-face classroom, family, or work conflicts. This saves administrative time on your part.

Set the exam courseware to accept answers after the preset timeframe for the exam. This efficiently manages students who are identified with Disability Concerns, as they will have extra time for exams. Additionally, if Internet or computer problems are encountered during an exam at any site, the proctor will notify you and you can adjust the student's score accordingly.

Assessment of the on-line components of a class

Use the WebCT function to do a mid-term assessment. It's anonymous, easy for the students to fill out, and it gives you immediate feedback on what the students are thinking about the course.

With on-line courses, satisfaction of students doesn't necessarily translate into "good course". Students might be satisfied because of the convenience on-line courses give them. That doesn't mean they are learning.

Take a look at the student evaluation instrument used by your department. Does it translate well for courses with substantive on-line components? If not, you might want to consider revising the instrument or developing your own for your on-line courses.

Who makes a good on-line teacher? One who enjoys writing and employs a Socratic approach to teaching.

Criterion-based assessment is needed for the on-line course.   Therefore, clear course goals must be communicated to the student. Also learning activities that require critical thinking and reflection are key class components. Finally, there must be a clear reflection of these teaching techniques in the evaluation of the students as well as the evaluation of the class.

For an effective and efficient way to improve the course using student feedback, conduct formative assessments at various times during the semester. This can be facilitated through online anonymous surveys that simply ask how they feel about the course materials, assignments, discussion and feedback. Use this information to improve the course during the semester and/or before teaching the course the next time.   Yes, you will have some complaints that aren't legitimate, but for the most part you will get some good feedback from the student's perspective on what is working and what isn't.

Using technology effectively

Prepare printed (or PDF) resources before the course begins to help students login and to get started in the online instructional environment. By using screen capture software it is easy to create step-by-step instructional handouts. This helps students who are uncomfortable using technology be more confident.

Away at a conference? Snowed in? Don't lose touch with your students and don't cancel class. An on-line discussion or "chat" can be very effective ways of teaching when you can't be on campus. One semester I was teaching an evening course, and a terrible ice storm was brewing, but the university didn't cancel classes. I e-mailed my students to stay home and log on, and we had one of the best discussions I have ever had with students using the chat function of WebCT. (As most were commuter students from out-of-town, they were very thankful for that alternative.)

If logistics allow, have the first class in person in a lab so that all students can learn how to access the course site and materials and orient themselves to the environment. This also helps the instructor know that all students have successfully logged into the class.

Time saving techniques

If you do group work, put a column with each student's group name in your grade book. When you give the group grades, sort by group name, and the recording goes so much faster.

Using discussion boards rather than email: If appropriate, have students post questions on discussions posts so all students can benefit from Q&A. Also encourage students to answer as well as ask questions.

You are not on call 24/7! Even though the technology allows us instant access to each other through email and discussion board postings, you do not have to be 'online' all of the time to be an effective online teacher. It is highly recommended that you set the expectations of your students by including an email and discussion board policy statement in your syllabus. This might look something like: "I read email and discussion board postings daily Tuesday – Saturday, but not on Sunday or Monday. I usually respond to email and questions posted on the discussion board as soon as possible, but at least within 24 hrs. If you send an email or post a message on the days that I do not log in, I will respond as soon as possible on the next day I

log in."   Now the tricky part is for YOU to stick to this schedule. We are always tempted to log in to see what's going on, but the first time you answer an email or post a response on one of your days off, the students will expect that for the rest of the semester.

Only log into your class once per day to read discussion posts, email and check assignments. This will help with time management by making the most efficient use of your time. Some of us would love to be able to extend our on-campus classes but we can't because we are limited by time and schedule. Even though the online environment eliminates the boundaries of the schedule, there are still time constraints for everyone and your time is very valuable. Use your time wisely and with the most benefit for the students.

Get your entire course prepared BEFORE you begin the semester. Online materials and an online course require more advanced planning and preparation than an on-campus course. All of the course materials, assessments, and assignments should be in the content management system or on the course website before the semester starts so that the instructor can use his/her time to interact with the students. Trying to prep as you teach the class is a recipe for disaster! Time creeps up on you and by mid-semester you are up all night trying to get lessons ready for the next day when the students are going to expect it. Do yourself a huge favor and get it done before you start teaching!

Other Ideas

Cultivate a "good-faith-effort" culture in your on-line endeavors. There will be times when things just don't work, for the teacher and the student. Expect things to go well and expect students to get work done, but understand and be flexible with students when they do not. In turn, ask the students to do the same for you.

Good Faith Effort can also be used to encourage the students to read through the materials before coming to an on-campus class. Give them points for taking a very short online quiz (5 questions that covers the basic discussion points of the material) or answer a few questions and post in the discussion board before coming to class. Close the quiz at the start of class (you can set this parameter in most content management systems such as WebCT). There are no right or wrong answers; they just get credit if they attempted to answer the questions. The purpose is to encourage them to read ahead of time (even if it's the hour before class), to come somewhat prepared to begin discussion and to have an activity that you do not have to grade to give them credit.

Don't assume that everyone under the age of 22 is techno-literate. In fact, my research shows something quite different. Knowing how to use an X-Box and a joystick is definitely not the same as being computer literate.

Combat the idea that students need hard copy of on-line syllabi and/or handouts; they don't. Most students tell me that they like that the syllabus is on-line, but resent that they have to print it off. I'm trying very hard to change this culture and tell them repeatedly that no one should have to print it off at all.

Be prepared to hear that the only reasons you, as an instructor, use on-line resources are because your department is "cheap" and/or you are lazy. That's right. From the students all the way up to the Provosts office, there is a popular and prevalent notion that using on-line teaching resources is a labor-saving, time-saving, money-saving tactic. If only they really knew.

On-line courses actually require more on the part of the student. My research and experience shows that teaching on-line courses and using on-line resources are more demanding on a student's organization, time management skills and discipline than they ever expected. And be prepared to have to assign more failing grades than you are used to as a consequence of this miscalculation.

Join the Online and **Web-based Teaching and Learning Community (TLC)** sponsored by CTLT. They meet on the first and third Fridays of the month. They discuss issues and new ideas pertaining to using web-based instruction in fully or partially online courses. Contact Eli Collins-Brown at elcolli@ilstu.edu for most information about our first meeting this semester.

Or create your own TLC within your college or peer group. Contact Nancy Bragg, CTLT Coordinator, at nbragg@ilstu.edu for more information.

Two excellent resources that will give you many more ideas are:
Discussion-based online teaching to enhance student learning : theory, practice, and assessment by Tisha Bender. Stylus, 2003, ISBN: 1579220657

Assessing online learning, Patricia Comeaux, editor. Anker Pub. Co., 2005, ISBN: 1882982770

The Participants

Eli Collins-Brown Doctoral Candidate, Curriculum & Instruction, and CTLT Facilitator
Tim Fredstrom, Music
Paulette Miller, Health Sciences
Nancy Bragg, Curriculum and Instruction
Robert Wazienski, Sociology-Anthropology
Rosie Hauck, Accounting
Jean Memken, Moderator, Family and Consumer Sciences