Make your online course feel like a personal journey—

not an impersonal content map

Wilmington University Teaching and Learning with Symposium
Monday, May 7, 2018
Sandy McVey, University of Delaware

This session will showcase strategies and course management tools to encourage student interaction with course content, each other, and instructors. Examples include: lively discussion boards, digital teams, showcasing and shout-out recognition, video chat office hours, and grading with rubrics to carve out time for personalized comments. Attendees will be encouraged to share their own winning applications in this all-learners-on-deck discussion.

Discussion boards are the first tool in the online kit.

Interact

Make the first prompt personal.

Why they chose the course, pre-conceptions about the course, how this course ties in to career aspirations, encourage them to update profile with photo. Complete the discussion prompt yourself so they get to know a bit about you.

Set open/close dates or leave open. Broad subjects open all term: General discussion, Resource I would like to share, Events and Activities related to the class. Directed discussions closed after a certain period. Students can read, but not contribute after a certain date. Valuable for graded discussion, to keep students interacting on a regular basis, keep everyone on task.

Join the conversation. Open the discussion with a thoughtful prompt and a challenge. Read student posts and chime in on occasion to let them know you are present and aware. When the discussion closes, revise your original prompt with a summary of value derived from the exchange. Encourage (or require) that students reply in a thoughtful manner to other posts.

Full credit for partial participation. Use the tool regularly, but allow students to selectively skip (20%) of the discussions without penalty. The weekly topic may not be of interest, it is a particularly busy time of the semester, etc. Forcing full participation leads less engaging exchanges.
In life, everyone works in groups. The sooner you break students into teams, the easier it will be to get past mental barriers.

Contract

Express value. You are not doing this to grade fewer assignments. You are not using this as a tactic for students to teach each other so you do not have to teach. Working in a team is a life skill that employers expect. Modelling it in the (online) classroom setting underscores it’s value and makes for better learning experiences.

Determine expectations. Along with assignment, details provide a project timeline and grading rubric to make expectation very clear.

Group contract. Provide samples. Decide whether each team will develop their own, or in a smaller class, develop a central contract with commons terms and consequences. The benefit of the class contract is that the same understanding, or universally modified agreement, is for every group assignment. Personalized team contracts would require renegotiation for every team assignment.

Check-in with individuals. Privately email as many students on each team as possible, but not all the same day, or they will think it is an auto-generated message: inquiring about the team’s progress, offering encouragement, and reminding them of online office hours, or where to find project resources.

Expect milestones. Set a reasonable timeline. Provide sincere and responsive feedback, within 24-hrs of submission close is ideal. Consider that when setting submission deadlines. If you prefer to grade on Saturday morning, have assignments due by midnight on Friday night. If you are great at time management, grade submissions without releasing the scores to students as they come in.
Make your online course feel like a personal journey—not an impersonal content map

Everyone likes to think they have control of their own destiny.

Fast-track

Alternate topics spark interest. Have students “pick a side” to debate. View a global problem from different perceptions: citizen within the population, someone from the outside looking in, someone older, or younger. Challenge them to create for different audiences: how would you explain this to a child, to a peer, to an older adult?

Vary submission types. Think beyond the written paper and presentation. Create videos in public service announcement, breaking news, commercial, or man-on-the-street news clips to present the story. Consider accepting an audio podcast. Perhaps a graphic or photo along with supporting dialog could effectively relay the information.

Choose 3 out of 5. We often quote that “less is more.” Have students submit 3 out of 5 possible assignments without penalty. For those interested in extra credit submission of the alternates could be considered.

Everyone appreciates praise. The online environment is no exception.

Impact

Announcement with examples of work. Include short excerpts of model passages and explain why they stood out when assignment grades are released.

LMS mail system for specific kudos. Keep a file with some standard responses such as, “the depth of your writing has really improved is your last submission.” Be sure to address the student by name.

Weekly awards. Award contributions towards class knowledge. Public verbal or written accolades that encourage content interaction. Examples: best external reference to promote
Make your online course feel like a personal journey--not an impersonal content map

class learning, most interactive in group discussions, or best self-reflection entry (shared with the group with permission).

Achievement badges. Achievement badges identify students who have demonstrated a specific trait. Acknowledging emotional engagement in the class is particularly valuable in online classes. Examples: most thoughtful reply to a classmate’s post, most supportive teammate (as voted by their peers), on time-every time.

If your online course is small, under 20, keep a record of whom you have acknowledged and make sure everyone receives public praise in some form over the course duration. For an easy interface to create your own badges see: http://www.onlinebadgemaker.com/3d-badge-maker

Students want to connect with you.

React

Twice-weekly video recap. Consider polling to find the times that work best for most, including you! Consider early in the week evening at 7:30pm, Saturday morning at 8:30am. Try to keep a consistent schedule throughout the semester.

Live with chat and recorded. Avoid the mini-lecture. Provide discussion prompts about the current topic and encourage interaction between students in written chat, or by turning over the microphone to a participant. Makes notes of verbal exchanges and copy the chat into a document for future reference.

2nd weekly session reflects and builds on exchanges spurred by 1st. This is a great opportunity to summarize the great work you see from the instructor perspective. Nice venue to for shout-outs and showcasing. A summary Announcement may be sent to the entire class with pertinent information and expressions of enjoyment from this community-building activity.

Don’t be discouraged if no one logins in live. Learners have chosen the online venue because life commitments impair their ability to meet face-to-face. It is not a reflection of how engaged they are in the course, or how they feel about you as an instructor.

Late night Exam review in fuzzy slippers. Needless to say, they’ll love you for this. Knowing that you are staying up late the night before the exam to help them study is always appreciated.
Make your online course feel like a personal journey—
not an impersonal content map

Until grades do not matter, speed grading with rubrics is a
terrific strategy.

Facilitate Consistent rubrics. Create base rubrics for discussions and assignments that can be reused throughout the semester. Not only are they easy for you to reapply, but students learn what criteria consistently matters to excel in your class.

4-point scale. Think 4 is “standing ovation quality/out-of-the-park/superb”, and 1 is “ultimate fail/strike out/failure”. If the item rating does not fall under either extreme, it is easy to determine if they rating should be 3 (closer to superb) or 2 (closer to failure). Remember 0 is an option if the item is completely missing. Expressive expressions are interesting, but be sure to use vocabulary that can be defined through a dictionary for non-native speakers or more traditional students.

Constructive feedback. Overall and specific. Criticism encourages growth. Excessive praise weakens motivation. Consider sharing the two web articles included in this handout from Lifehack.org that do a great job explaining this concept. Remember that the word “but” almost completely wipes out the idea or phrase directly before it in both aural and written feedback.

Why Criticism is Better Than a Compliment

https://www.lifehack.org/656171/why-criticism-is-better-than-compliment?ck_subscriber_id=200568015

Why Every Successful Person Thrives on Negative Feedback

https://www.lifehack.org/650144/why-every-successful-person-thrives-on-negative-feedback?ck_subscriber_id=200568015
Make your online course feel like a personal journey—
not an impersonal content map

Package
The learning experience will provide a similar experience for all.

But, notice I am wiping out the previous image from your brain, by making each learner feel that his or her contributions matter you create an environment where:

• All share a cohesive learning experience.
• Strong writing and communication skills develop,
• Creative concepts come into play from left field,
• And sometimes preconceived notions are flipped for students and instructors with open minds.


May the next leg of your journey be even more fulfilling than the last!

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” -Maya Angelou

Thank you!
Sandy McVey
www.sandymcvey.com/presentations