

17 Tips for Successfully Including Peer Collaboration in an Online Course

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Building relationships and communities through peer collaboration in online courses is a concern for many instructors, and finding a starting point might be a challenge. Fortunately, there are instructors who have undergone the processes.

Instructors within the University System of Georgia participated in a study that explored examples of peer collaboration exercises within their online university courses. The instructors represented five universities and nine academic disciplines. Their educational and professional backgrounds varied greatly.

For most of the instructors, the online courses in which they included peer collaboration were their first experiences teaching online, and most did not receive formal training to do so, nor did they have access to teaching assistants during the various phases of the course.

The instructors employed a variety of communication mechanisms and technology tools within the courses involved in the study and the examples of peer collaboration exercises offered by the instructors ranged from the simple to the complex.

The data provided by the instructors revealed several instances of common practices and lessons learned, and a set of heuristics for successfully including peer collaboration in an online course emerged.

1. Get rid of preconceptions — Prior to beginning the design of the online collaboration activities, abandon any preconceptions regarding which types of exercises cannot occur online.

2. Adapt and adopt existing collaborative exercises — Rather than creating new and original online peer collaboration exercises from the beginning, exercises can be developed initially by referencing previous classroom collaborative activities that proved successful and adapting those exercises for use online.

3. Begin with a manageable amount of collaboration — To provide optimal learning experiences for the students, incorporate a few well-planned exercises when first including such activities.

Collaboration, participation, and communication expectations must be written into the syllabus.

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

5. Make the collaboration a stated course outcome — Encourage student efficacy with peer collaboration by first

making collaboration a stated outcome of the course.

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

7. Provide structure for and require deliverables from the students — Help students manage time and meet course milestones by requiring deliverables and informing them of expected benchmark competencies.

8. Organize the student groups early and stabilize the groups throughout the course — Early group formation allows the students to become familiar with their groupmates and consequently promotes ease of communication within the groups. If possible, groups should remain intact for the duration of the course to promote team cohesion.

9. Create groups of three to five students — When groups contain more than five students, they become unmanageable. In large groups, “lurkers” are able to not participate, “slackers” are able to unduly benefit, and “controllers” are able to domi-

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nate the discourse. Groups of two may not fully allow the students learn the skills of group consensus gathering and problem solving.

10. Instruct groups to report large problems — During the peer collaboration exercises, students should be allowed — and expected — to solve internal problems. However, students should be informed that irreconcilable problems should be reported to allow an intervention to occur that would enable project work to progress.

11. Provide feedback often — Prior to tests and finals, students should receive feedback on how well they understand the course information.

12. Carefully choose discussion topics — When preparing discussion topics for the groups, choose interesting and controversial topics to elicit discourse.

13. Prepare in advance for chat room discussions — First, be organized for chat room discussions. Make the chat room topic and any associated questions available to the students at least three days prior to the exercise. Instruct the students to prepare questions and comments regarding the topic to help facilitate the flow of conversation during the exercise. Next, to promote student involvement and activity, give grades for substantive participation in the chat discussion and inform the students of the grading structure prior to the chats.

14. Organize the discussion board for productive discourse — Because of the volume of traffic that the discussion board can

generate, it is important to provide a great deal of structure in this area. First, create an exhaustive list of topics that might be discussed during the course and create headings for each of those topics in the discussion area. Instruct the students to post messages under the appropriate topic heading on the discussion board and make the students aware of the rules and etiquette for posting a message to the discussion area. Next, instruct the students to place questions for general consumption on the discussion board and encourage other students to respond to the message if they have an answer.

15. Constantly facilitate and monitor online collaboration — At no time during the course can the students be on autopilot. Since physical and verbal cues cannot be obtained from the students, facilitation and monitoring of the course are the only ways to know that they understand the concepts that are being provided. During the peer collaboration exercise, visit the discussion areas to make certain that the students remain on track with the concepts and on task with the assignment.

16. Promote peer collaborations through grading — When conducting group exercises that require the use of the discussion board, remind the students that posted discussions are designed to replace the classroom discussions and that only substantive contributions will be graded. In addition to the overall group grade for an exercise, be certain to require the students to individually submit their work to ensure that every-

one will have something to contribute once the groups meet. Conclude the exercise by having the students complete a group evaluation.

17. Receive student feedback on collaboration exercises — In addition to a general course evaluation, ask students for feedback on each peer collaboration exercise, particularly those that are newly implemented. Use the comments received from the students to adjust, abandon, or confirm the use of the exercises.

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