

DECEMBER 2007

10 Ways to Engage Students in an Online Course

By Mingsheng Dai, PhD

The success of an online course depends greatly on how actively engaged students are with the instructor, with their classmates, with the content, with technology, and with course management tools. Interactivity in any teaching and learning context involves students responding to information, seeking instructors' feedback, reflecting on the feedback, and acting to appropriately tailor personal learning experience.

In many cases, effects of interaction in an online environment can be richer than in face-to-face situations, since students can critically evaluate their understanding of the content by sharing their knowledge and experiences in discussion questions and postings.

Engaging activities for online courses are designed to be relevant to the content, associated with course objectives and outcomes, require active involvement from students, increase retention, and be fun and rewarding. Simply clicking a link, or uploading a file, is just the first step toward other experiences of interactive learning.

Here are some of my methods and examples in creating engaging activities for online courses.

1. Syllabus quiz

To reinforce policies, deadlines, expectations, projects, etc., specified in the syllabus, I have created a syllabus quiz to test students' understanding of course outcomes, to stress their responsibilities, and to communicate my expectations. It has to be completed within the first week of the course and students need a 100 percent score.

2. Interview report

Most online students are working adults with very busy and demanding schedules. They tend to work at their own pace and in isolation. To reduce loneliness and to increase their awareness of the learning community, I use the discussion board not only for them to introduce each other as a get-to-know-you activity in the first week, but also to have them interview each other on the topics and report back to the discussion board. This offers a vivid description of what each student has learned from his or her interview partner. Students find this activity helpful because it gives them another opportunity to interact with each another.

3. Feedback survey

When the course is one-third of

TIPS FROM THE PROS

Hybrid Course Design Considerations

Creating a hybrid course poses challenges that differ from those of creating a face-to-face or online course. Here are some questions to keep in mind as you create a hybrid course:

- What are the learning outcomes for your course?
- Which learning outcomes are best suited to the online environment and which are appropriate for the face-to-face classroom?
- How will you integrate your online and face-to-face course components?
- What will online discussions add to your course?
- What challenges regarding online discussions do you anticipate? How will you handle these challenges?
- How will you assess the work in each setting?

Source: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Learning Technology Center. "Questions for Reflection on Creating Hybrid Courses." Accessed Nov. 14, 2007 at [@](http://www4.uwm.edu/ltc/hybrid/faculty_resources/questions.cfm)

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Blogs or Discussion Boards?

Blogs and discussion boards both provide opportunities for interaction in online courses, but there are instances when one is more appropriate than the other, says Matt Crosslin, instructional designer at the University of Texas at Arlington's Center for Distance Education.

Blogs are typically organized in reverse-chronological order and focus on the most recent input, whereas discussion boards focus on the feedback to an initial prompt.

Blog entries are typically longer than discussion board prompts and can include multimedia. These blog entries are excellent places to complement the content in the rest of the course by providing current information on a topic culled from the Web.

"When you've got five, six, or ten paragraphs of initial stuff to comment on versus one question, it does give the students a lot more to base their response on," Crosslin says.

Often the prompt for commenting on blogs is simply a comment button. With discussion boards, since there is usually just a short introduction, the prompts tend to be more specific. "A discussion board can have a broader range of questions, more than just 'what are your comments?'" Crosslin says.

Pros and cons of blogs

As with all tools, there are positive and negative aspects of blogs in an online course.

According to Crosslin, blogs have the following pros:

- Blogs generally have an interface that is intuitive to use.
- Blogs present content in reverse chronological order, which makes it easy to follow.
- Blogs enable instructors to add current content to their courses.

- Blog platforms have tools that enable live chat and the viewing of content by date or topic.

Crosslin cites the following cons:

- Most course management systems do not feature blogs, and so blogs are often hosted by external websites, which brings up the issue of support and ownership.
- One downside of keeping one's course up to date is that there are fewer opportunities to proofread this content before posting it.

Advice for using blogs

Crosslin offers the following advice for those considering using blogs in their online courses:

- Use blogs for a specific pedagogical purpose.
- Don't duplicate content from the main part of the course.
- Provide a rubric to help students know what is expected of them.
- If possible, host the blog within the course management system so you won't have to depend on an external host.

Uses for discussion boards

Discussion boards will continue to have a place in the online classroom, Crosslin says. "Some instructors just want the questions up there and the student responses. That's their focus. I still think there's a great use for discussion boards, especially for feedback forums, to ask questions. If you don't have a news or announcement function, a discussion board can be a great place to put news and announcements, and students can ask questions if they need clarification."

Contact Matt Crosslin at matt@edugeekjournal.com. @

Retention of Online Students

By Riad S. Aisami, PhD

Isolation, disengagement, disconnectedness, dissatisfaction, and technology issues are key factors that contribute to students dropping out of online courses. While attracting students to enroll in an online course is the prime responsibility of the academic institution, retaining students is the responsibility of the online instructor. Hence, the question is this: How can online instructors make their courses engaging? The following suggestions can help make courses more attractive and engaging, which will help retain online students:

1. Use the Instructional System Design (ISD) approach

As you prepare to take on an online course, think about following some kind of a systematic approach such as ISD that provides the needed tools to develop and manage the online learning process. Aisami's 5Ds Model (Define, Design, Develop, Deliver, and Determine) and other similar online teaching models like the Louisiana State University's Model are developed based on the ADDIE Model (Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate).

These online teaching models have the following characteristics:

- The overall goal and learning objectives are defined in light of the students' needs and skills.
- The instructional structure is designed around the specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes that students need to learn in order to achieve the learning objectives.
- The instructional strategy and materials to teach the course objectives are both developed based on the "blueprint" of the design step.
- The course website and the course

instructional delivery approach are built, developed, and managed based on the instructional strategy.

- An evaluation process is designed and conducted to determine the effectiveness of the course in terms of the students' abilities to achieve the course objectives. Based on these determinations, the course is revised to be more effective and engaging for a new group of students.

2. Develop an engaging online course syllabus

Engaging online courses require an engaging course syllabus, one that:

- is comprehensive and hyperlinked
- presents detailed guidelines of the course information, learning objectives, assignments, requirements, teaching methodologies, documentations, and course-related resources
- provides hyperlinks to the websites that students may need to refer to before or as the course starts, including websites of the bookstore, the online library, the electronic learning management system, supplemental materials and course-related resources, the help desk, and the instructor's professional homepage (if applicable).

An engaging syllabus will help you make a good first impression, chart the course's roadmap, and set the rules of engagement. The course syllabus helps online students overcome the fear of the unknown and provides them with the security they need by teaching them upfront what to expect and how to plan for it.

3. Develop interactive instruction

Look for ways to develop an interactive instructional delivery mode

that attracts students' attention and engages them further in the course materials. The following are some of these ways:

- **Computer-Based Training (CBT):** You can develop Computer-Based Training for the course instruction and post it on the course website using authoring system tools such as Trainersoft or ToolBook. These software programs enable you to develop interactive course instruction with no programming required. Also, they allow you to integrate into the course instruction all types of multimedia. With CBT, students can gain new knowledge independently and go through some drill-and-practice activities that encourage their participation and allow them to check on their learning. Also, students can receive instant feedback that informs them of the knowledge of response (KOR) on a particular practice question or activity. However, CBT and Web-based instruction with a variety of multimedia files requires large electronic space on the Web and, therefore, instructors need to be aware of the space available for their course shells on the Web.
- **Synchronous class sessions:** Synchronous sessions bring online students closer together and put them in direct contact with the instructor. Also, you can use some other Web technologies to post audio or video files of a live lecture, discussion, or an interview with a professional. These technologies may include PresenterPlus, a synchronized media tool that works interchangeably with Blackboard and other E-LMS programs and supports streaming formats of various media players such as

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If You Build It (or Link to It), Can They Use It?

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

In the last few articles, I have discussed using media in online courses and how to overcome numerous obstacles to getting the right kinds of media for your online courses. This month, I'll finish the series by discussing some learner-centered obstacles that need to be considered so the media elements you build or link to will have the desired impact.

Media benefits

Media, such as pictures, charts, animations, audio, and video, have natural characteristics that can be exploited to help learners learn and think critically about the content being taught. For example, video programs dramatizing historical events can help learners analyze factors that may have led to these events. Computer animations of human body processes, such as digestion, help medical students "see" body processes so they can think more critically about digestive conditions.

In online courses, where text (in books, articles, or on the screen) is often the primary content delivery mode, media can make the content come alive. Imagine designing an online course in which one of the course modules is about the history of the Internet. You might provide a text-based timeline of the events leading up to wide adoption of the Internet. Now add photos, bios, and audio clips of Internet historians and pioneers talking about their contributions in the early days of the Internet and ask learners to discuss how the skills of this divergent group of people led to the Internet as we know it today. This is much more engaging than the timeline alone and a good way to help learners think critically about the people and events

leading up to the Internet as we know it today.

Media obstacles

There are some common learner-centered limitations that need to be considered when using media in your online courses. Two of the biggest are access (which makes viewing and interacting with media possible or not) and the lack of reliability of outside links.

Got access?

You may build it, but learners may not be able to access it. Bandwidth, or the amount of data that can fit through the connection between the server and the user (learner) at one time, can be a real problem. The more media you use and the more bandwidth these media elements require, the more potential hassles there are. Learners may need to wait for high-bandwidth media data such as video to download and if they are trying to fit coursework into an already hectic life, waiting a long time may be extremely frustrating or even a deal breaker.

In most cases, learners need fast Internet connections (such as DSL, cable mode, or T1 access) to view and interact with online media. Some learners may have fast connections at work but not at home. Some are unable to listen to audio at work, though, because they either do not have a sound card or are unable to use headphones (so they can listen without annoying everyone around them). And they may be unable to download needed media players (for example, QuickTime or Flash) because of their company's IT restrictions.

When learners do not have fast Internet access at work *and* at home, online learning capacity is diminished. Work and family schedules are

often hectic and the ability to jump into schoolwork from anywhere is often critical to online learners' success.

To do: Do a reality check on the technology requirements for using the media you want to produce or link to. Select media that most learners can use. (But it's usually unwise to take a "lowest common denominator" approach.) Start a discussion about whether the technology requirements are adequate. For example, should fast access at work and home as well as the ability to download and use new players as they become available be required? Help learners determine if they have adequate access to be successful and help them think about how to get additional, adequate access. (For example, many libraries and some fast-food restaurants, coffee shops, and laundromats provide free access.)

Got links?

One of the recommendations I made in a previous article was to overcome costs and development time by linking to existing media on the Internet. I stand by that advice, but you should expect that some of the links you select will not work when learners try to use them. Some will be down because of server problems, and others will have changed URLs as organizations update their websites. And others will simply vanish. Check all the links before your course materials go live, but remember that some of the links that you checked yesterday may be problematic today. That's just the way it is.

Another problem with linking to existing media on other sites is that some online instructors provide *too many* resource links. A long list of

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RealMedia, Windows Media, and MP3.

- Asynchronous discussion forums: Thoughtful discussions can encourage students to interact with each other academically and help build a community. Weekly discussions that are supplemental to the textbook materials, open-ended questions that promote students' learning and foster their critical thinking, interactive topic debates, and concise discussion guidelines and precise discussion rubrics, have been found to be an effective approach in achieving the desired learning outcomes (Aisami, 2007).
- Collaborative instructional activities: Collaboration among students provides students with the social presence they need to establish trust, build confidence, and develop the required online learning attitude and self-discipline. Having students work together in groups to undertake a course project and/or any other course instructional activities requires students' frequent communication, prompt collaboration, and active participation in the discussion and decision making. Clear goals of the required collaborative activity, concise guidelines of the rules of engagement, and homogeneity among group members have been found to optimize interaction and maximize students' performance in achieving the desired instructional goals. In general, collaboration allows online students to do more together than they could alone (Aisami, 2007). With all the positive potential outcomes from successful information and knowledge sharing expected from an optimal collaboration, it is easy to forget that such peer-to-peer exchange depends on time, effort, and trust among peers. Sharing may not occur when there is competition for scarce resources,

where knowledge is power, or where time is so short that engagement with peers is outside the bounds of possibility (Caroline Haythornthwaite, 2006).

4. Build an attractive and inviting course website

The social isolation that exists in online courses may not disappear entirely in spite of the continuous advancements in Web technology. It may, however, be reduced by increasing the level of social interaction and engagement of online courses (Aisami, 2006). The following are some of the features that can help you build attractive and inviting course websites:

- Video announcement: Prepare a video announcement and post it on the course website. It makes a big difference for online students to see and hear their instructor introduce the course personally, present navigation instructions, and verbally explain the course requirements, objectives, and assignments.
- Students' homepages: Online students can use the CMS homepage function to build their individual homepages. This gives students the opportunity to see each other's pictures and read about each other's backgrounds.
- Class photo album: You can coordinate the efforts with your students to use the Microsoft PowerPoint Album function to create an online class album that includes the instructor's and students' photos.
- Class group picture: Use the Photoshop, Paint, or any other photo editing program to group the individual pictures of the students to create a group picture of the class.
- iMail: The iMail feature of Blackboard is a communication tool that allows students to send and receive email messages internally within the course website without a need for any external email address or an Internet

service provider. This feature encourages students to visit the course website frequently to check their feedback messages and communicate with the instructor and with each other.

- Course calendar: A course calendar that charts the course assignments week by week and explains what to do is helpful in increasing students' participation and interaction.
- Break room: You can also add a special discussion forum on the discussion board and call it "Break Room" for students to socialize by having some personal chats or by sharing personal experiences or social events.

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Online Teaching: Perfect for Student-Centered Learning!

By Errol Craig Sull

Bob Dylan said it best: “The times they are a-changin’.”

The tradition of education has always dictated what we now know as faculty-centered instruction (FCI). Here, the teacher has the role of Lord of the Manor, holding the class together through lectures, designing assignments and tests, grading, and dictating what material was to be learned and when. The students have little to do on their own, waiting for what the instructor dictates and directs. But the educational process is constantly morphing, and one of the biggest changes in recent years has been student-centered instruction (SCI), where some of the learning burden is shifted to the student. Here, active learning experiences are substituted for lectures, students are held responsible for material not explicitly discussed in class, self-paced and/or cooperative (team) learning is used, and critical thinking becomes more important as students must solve open-ended problems that do not follow text models.

Many faculty, unwilling to give up their traditional FCI role, have balked at SCI. Yes, there is a myriad of challenges in implementing SCI into a brick-and-mortar classroom; but we are here discussing online instruction, and while difficulties remain in smoothly integrating SCI into online education, the distance learning classroom is an ideal environment in which to employ SCI. The following suggestions will help you make SCI a valuable and effortless teaching approach in your courses—and have you saying, “That’s cool!” to Dylan’s refrain:

Write a Tom Sawyer-like

whitewash the fence welcoming email. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom got others to whitewash the fence—a job he hated—by pretending that he was having a great time. Your sincere enthusiasm for SCI—without ever writing “SCI” or anything like it—can go a long way in getting your students excited about this approach to your course. You set the tone: never forget that.

Be a constant presence for suggestions and insights. Look at your role as that of the coordinator of a cooperative: give initial directions and guidance, but also constantly pop in to give kudos for good student postings, suggestions to help their learning, and applause for discussion or team postings that developed into long threads from one initial student’s thoughts. Also, always offer suggestions on improving writing. Be a bit self-deprecating at times. Be sure to point out the importance of supporting and thanking fellow classmates for ideas. All of this will go a long way in keeping students engaged and helping them to learn more.

Post mini-lectures that translate into ultra important. If I were to see lecture after lecture posted by a professor for reading, I’d sooner take out my eyes with a hot poker than read them. Lectures like this become so much blah-blah-blah, and students soon find it difficult to absorb all the information. But by posting mini-lectures (one to three paragraphs centered on one subject), the students will recognize these as important because of their infrequency, be more eager to read them, and will certainly absorb—and remember—their contents easier. (Hint: you might want to mention these in

your welcoming email.)

Offer an engaging variety of assigned and supplemental readings. Textbooks, it seems, have, for the most part, remained stodgy in their writing styles; asking an online student to read large portions of these can result in the same problems as posting many long lectures. Choose your assigned readings—and how much to read—wisely. And also always offer a variety of supplemental readings that are engaging, interesting, and perhaps fun—the students won’t have to read them, but you can make them want to.

Offer reality-based education approaches to material covered in class. By stressing connections between what students learn from the assigned material and its use in the real world, you are telling students they must rely on their critical thinking, interacting with others in class, and further research to “fill in the blanks” of what they have not been implicitly taught. Hold them responsible for getting this information—but don’t punish them if they get it wrong: you want them to have “A-ha!” moments of learning, not “What’s the use of trying?” thoughts.

Get students actively involved in the course. By having students offer suggestions—readings, websites, poetry, theories, organizations, etc.—to enhance various portions of the course they become more invested in this cooperative of a class you are coordinating and guiding. The bonuses are that students will be learning in deeper layers of what the course initially offered, they have another internal

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links, to many learners, is a recipe for overload and anxiety before the first click. Learners need guidance and focus when using links and the media elements they may contain.

To do: Consider recommending a website download tool such as Web Whacker (www.bluesquirrel.com/products/webwhacker/) so learners can download online materials in case they become unavailable.

Caveat: The purpose of this tool is for students be able to view websites offline, not to be able to share these files with others. Ask the owner of the materials for permission if you want to share them and get advice

from your legal department to make sure you are not infringing on copyright laws.

Find some really good outside resources, but don't link to the universe. Annotate these links so learners know exactly what to expect (what they will see/hear/do, time needed, media players needed). Provide very clear instructions on what students should look for while using the media (for example, instruct them to observe how a graph changes over time as more data points are added) and what to do afterward (for example, answer discussion questions or write a position paper).

A good instructor helps learners

make personal meaning out of the course content, activities, and interactions. Media can be very helpful toward this end, but first, the learner needs to be able to access and use the media without getting frustrated or overloaded.

Next month, I'll begin a new series on ways to evaluate your online courses.

Patti Shank, PhD, CPT, is a widely recognized information and instructional designer, 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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motivator to stay engaged in the course, and you pick up additional items for inclusion the next time you teach the course.

Make teamwork an opportunity to call on individual talents.

Teamwork is always a challenge for online instructors (I've devoted one of my previous columns to it). But one very helpful and successful strategy for having students want to participate in a team is to ask each student to use his or her individual strengths and talents in bolstering the team effort and any team project that is required. The students get a chance to "strut their stuff" and the team as a whole benefits. And you should always have a solid presence in any team assignments.

A "secret" to successful SCI: the weird, the unusual, the fun. By occasionally posting small tidbits—news reports, items from magazines or books, etc.—that are light but relate to your subject, the students become even more engaged in and enthusiastic about the course. (Also ask the students to make similar

contributions.) These become nice counterweights to the drier, more serious components of the course.

Make it known that all grading is fair and individualized. Before students can raise the question of someone riding others' efforts in teamwork, let the class know you grade the whole as a sum of its parts—but the laggards will not get the same grade as the achievers. And your grading approach should be clearly detailed in your welcoming email: students can refer to it and you can, if necessary, remind students to review it.

Know that students have a variety of learning styles. SCI is not a panacea; some students will, in fact, simply work better with an FCI approach. But the times they are, indeed, changing, and by placing more of the learning process on the students you offer students more options to explore and expand their own learning capabilities. Certainly, you will need to make adjustments in each course based on student difficulties with an SCI approach. And this individualized approach keeps you even more of a

practicing SCI participant.

REMEMBER: To grow a carrot, the farmer must give it fertilizer, water, and soil—but must allow for the carrot to grow and spread its own roots; only this way can the carrot find its path to the most nutrients to ensure the strongest growth.

Please let me hear from you, including sending along suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at errol-craigsull@aol.com. And, as always, with each of my columns I offer a sampling of whatever subject I've discussed. For this column, I'll send you one of my welcoming emails I mentioned.

*Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 12 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—a collection of his online teaching activities titled *Pebbles: A Most Unusual Approach to Very Effective Writing*. @*

the way into the semester, students are required to complete an anonymous feedback survey, which asks them about how the class is running; the depth, length, and challenges of assignments; preferences in communication with the instructor; and the time they spend weekly in reading, completing assignments, and responding to discussion questions. This survey provides me with very important information about their levels of satisfaction and their expectations. It also serves as a self-check to me as an instructor. After hearing students' voices, I will summarize the results, share them with the students, and make improvements.

4. Group projects

Can group projects be done successfully online? Yes, but success requires planning, time commitment, monitoring, and supporting. I usually spend two or three times more time during the group project period to check on the progress of each group. In order to have a quality experience in this activity, I need to have strong leadership in each group. Before setting up groups, I ask for volunteer group leaders who will guide the group, brainstorm ideas and topics for the group project, set up group chat sessions, communicate to group members on the process of the project, and finally combine individual presentations into one to represent the group. Once I have group leaders, I assign group members. Each group member has a specific role, and each has to submit a draft of the project to me to be graded. I constantly check with group leaders and provide them with my assistance and support. To motivate participation in a group project, I design it in such a way that half of the grade of the group project comes from peer evaluation. Each member has to anonymously evaluate the contribution and partic-

ipation of each team member. I then tally the result. I find this method to be fair because every member gets a chance to evaluate his or her team members candidly. By working collaboratively in cyberspace, isolated students regard themselves as components of a cohesive group.

5. Elluminate Live or Wimba Live Classroom

I use Elluminate Live and Wimba Live Classroom, where students and I can "talk" via microphone or headset and "see" one another via webcam. I create a name puzzle with their first names and have them find their names on the Whiteboard/eBoard. I ask them to import their pictures onto Whiteboard/eBoard and have them tell stories so we can "see" and "visit" each other across the nation and around the world. I also use desktop application sharing to demonstrate step-by-step instructions in understanding a particular assignment, tutoring them and troubleshooting their problems in completing the assignment.

6. Peer review/critiques

After developing their own websites as one of the assignments, students are asked to post their URLs in the discussion board. To encourage sharing and learning, I have students critique each other's websites with the guidelines provided. They get a chance to visit classmates' websites, share their ideas and thoughts with the class, praise and encourage their classmates' good work, learn from each other, and, as a result, make improvements on their own websites.

7. Sharing research findings

Many times we have students search the Web for individual writing assignments. What about pairing them so they get another chance to interact with one another? Through communication, they find the same research topic of interest, read articles together, respond to each other's findings and reflections, and

learn from each other's perspectives. What a great way to get them involved in the subject matter!

8. Games

I also create games using StudyMate (www.respondus.com/products/studymate.shtml) for them to learn contents and concepts, such as flash cards, crossword puzzles, fill-in-the-blank, pick a letter, true and false, multiple choice, fact cards, etc. It is fun, interactive, and non-threatening, and it reinforces the comprehension of the content.

9. Student presentations

In almost every face-to-face class, students are expected to make presentations. Can it be done online? Yes, sure! How? There are a couple of ways to do it, including using a discussion board for students to post their presentations and/or presenting in Live Classroom chat sessions. With the technology we have now, such as Wimba Live Classroom, Elluminate Live, Adobe Connect, etc., students can "talk" via microphone or headset and can make a live presentation. Students are able to ask questions and comment on their peers' presentations, and presenters are able to respond to questions as if they were in a traditional classroom.

10. Guest speakers

Another way to engage students in an online course is to bring in guest speakers via discussion board and live chat sessions.

There are many ways we can engage students in their learning journey. We just have to be creative and have an open mind. Another important aspect we have to remember is that not everyone learns the same way as we design. We have to be flexible and make adjustments along the way.

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