Create a Learning Environment

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Hello, my name is Shay Potts, and I am an instructional designer at the Center for Instructional Technology and Training.

Objective

- Identify methods for creating "community" in an online course.

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In this presentation, we'll talk about ways that you can create community in your online course, and discuss why this is important.

You may remember that in the module 1 presentations, we mentioned that a sense of community is a critical feature of an online course. This helps keeps students from feeling isolated. Group learning promotes interaction and collaborative learning. Think about brainstorming sessions that you might have had when the group synergy gets everyone excited and producing interesting ideas. That's the type of thing we are hoping to create.

Students that are active within their group have a perception that they are learning and have a high degree of satisfaction with what they learn—because they had an active role. While they may not necessarily be learning more than they would without the group interaction, the higher satisfaction will translate into a more positive feeling about your course. This in turn, will reduce the potential number of drops and failures in your course.

In the course overall, our shared sense of purpose is reaching the course goals. Within that, we want students to feel that they are making a valued contribution to the group which will increase the group's mastery of the material.

If you have a small course, then group membership would be the students in the course. But in a larger course, you'll want to divide the class into groups. This may be a matter of assigning students whose last names begin with A-C to group 1, students D-F to group 2 and so forth. You might ask students to sign up for groups based upon topic. Then you can set up a separate discussion board for each group. This will help to personalize the interactions between the students and they'll get to know each other as the semester progresses.

You'll need to establish and enforce rules and policies for behavior. The Netiquette guide provided in this module will give you a starting point. Provide students with an anonymous survey periodically so they can review the contributions and behavior of their peers. Typically, groups will self-regulate without any need for faculty or TA intervention.

Often, you'll find that groups will take on a life of there own. Often, you'll find that group members become very active and will form friendships and study groups. Because of the relative anonymity of an online discussion board, students tend to say things that they would never say in a face to face class. Also, because it is easy to determine participation level, every student must contribute, which is something that can be difficult to manage in a classroom setting.

Best Practices

- Create a distinctive gathering place
- Define the purpose
- Suggest a process
- Provide interim deadlines

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Create a place for your students to get together. If you are dividing the class into groups, set up individual discussion boards for each group. Remember that other tools can be used to foster group collaboration as well.

Be specific about what you want the students to do. Is this group going to discuss the pros and cons of a topic? Are they going to design a study? Define the group's task.

Working as a group takes some practice, you can't expect freshmen to know the best way to work as part of a team. This is something that takes some practice. So provide a framework for them to use. Along with that, provide interim deadlines. If you want them to have a discussion, provide a deadline for each student to make an initial post, and then another deadline for a response.

It may be helpful to designate one student in each group to be the leader. Provide instructions as to what the leader needs to do. You may wish to suggest roles for each member of the group. You can certainly liven up a discussion by designating a student in each group to serve as the devil's advocate.

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Be sure to define the requirements and conduct that you expect from students. One of the biggest challenges in group work, is the perception of fairness. If a member of the group does not "pull their weight" does the rest of the group suffer? Opportunities for peer review can help pull lazier students into line. Generally, you'll be able to allow group members to resolve their own disputes. Avoid stepping in until the group comes to you with an issue.

The easiest way to foster community in an online course is through use of the course management system's discussion board. The best practices for using the discussion board reiterates the things that we have discussed regarding community in general. First of all, be sure that your expectations are clear and you have defined how you will grade the discussion.

Use open ended questions that leave room for interpretation. If you ask a question that has a specific answer, then once the first student posts the answer, there is little for the group to discuss. Along with that, any time that you can relate questions to the students' own lives and experiences, they're going to be much more interested and involved.

If you want the students to participate, then you need to assign points to the discussion. This is true for anything that you want students to do. They are busy, and will choose to spend their time on the things that will positively impact their grade.

Peer evaluation will help keep students on their toes as well as providing an opportunity for them to practice their critical thinking skills. You'll need to provide the students with an evaluation rubric at the start of the discussion activity.

Don't forget to provide the group with Netiquette guidelines.

The easiest way to grade a discussion board is to require a minimum number of initial posts and responses to the posts of others. You can quickly check to see if a student has met the minimum, and then you can spot check for content. It is a good idea to peek in on discussions randomly and provide a helpful comment here and there so that the students know that you are paying attention to them.

As I mentioned earlier, it may be helpful to assign roles for the discussion group. You can assign one person as the facilitator, another as the summarizer, and another as the devil's advocate.

Other ways that you can use the discussion board in your CMS is to provide students a general place to ask questions. In fact, it is a good idea to *require* students to post general questions to the discussion board. This would be like students raising their hands in class. The general discussion board allows you to answer the question once, rather than answering multiple e-mails. Also, students are likely to answer each others questions in such a forum.

You may want to provide your class with a social discussion board. This is a place where students can look for study group partners, share off-topic thoughts and make friends.

You can provide students with group discussion board so they can collaborate on group projects. The discussion board is also a place where students can provide critiques for each other's work.

Don't forget that as the course instructor, you are an important part of the learning community. Make your presence known as much as you can. An easy way to do this is with Announcements. Send out an e-mail announcement before classes begin to let students know how to access their course material. Remind them to log in to the course as soon as classes start as they may have assignments due right away.

Create a weekly announcement that points out an interesting current event that relates to the topic that week. And don't forget to send out a few "Good Job!" announcements when the class does well on an assignment or assessment.

As I mentioned earlier, randomly pop in on the discussions and suggest a new avenue of thought for that particular topic. You can set up virtual office hours and be available to your students synchronously through Skype, Google Hangouts, Adobe Connect, and even the chat tool in your course management system.

Don't forget that the most important communication students can have from you is feedback on their assignments. The quicker you can provide feedback, the easier it will be for students to incorporate that information into their next assignment. But if it will take a few days to do the grading, let the class know when you expect to return their work. This will save you from having to answer questions about when the grading will be complete.

Be sure that you have provided students with a method to contact you—it can be through e-mail within the course management system, or whatever method you prefer. Regardless of the contact method, give the students a time frame for when they can expect a response. As I have already mentioned, it is a good idea to ask students to post public questions on a general discussion board. But you need to make sure that you check that discussion board daily. If students don't receive a response, they'll start e-mailing you individually—which ultimately creates more work for you and your students.

Finally, review student grades regularly and contact any students who are falling behind before it is too late for them to catch up. Often, some attention from the course instructor is just what students need to get them back on track.

UF Standards and Markers of Excellence

- The course provides opportunities for ***students*** to ***engage*** with other ***students*** in a variety of communication and interaction experiences.
- The course provides opportunities for ***students*** to ***engage*** with the ***instructor*** in a variety of communication and interaction experiences.

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We reviewed the UF Standards and Markers of Excellence as they relate to interaction and engagement in the first module. Remember that we want to provide opportunities for students to engage with each other and the instructor in a variety of communication and interaction experiences.

UF Standards and Markers of Excellence

- Students are divided into appropriate-sized ***groups*** to encourage interaction and engagement.

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And we want to divide the class into groups as necessary to provide the best opportunities for interaction and engagement.

The student enrollment and the type of material that you are teaching may dictate how much interaction is practical for your course. And remember, that you don't want to add any extra work for your students or yourself. But anything that you can do to make your course an interesting place to exchange ideas will increase your student's chances for success.

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Additional photos came from the University of Florida course, AEB2014.

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Thank you.