Improve your Online Course

45th Annual AMATYC Conference
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
November 16, 2019
Agenda

- Brief overview of key elements
- Begin taking steps to improve your online class
Key Elements of Exemplary Online Courses

Community

- Building student/instructor relationships
- Facilitating student/student relationships

Consistent Structure

- Predictable navigation
- Standardized look, branding
Community: Group Interaction
Student/Student Relationships - Effective Group Work

- Instructor- or Student-formed
- Introductions or Survey
- Static or Dynamic
- Needs may change by class, semester, over time, etc.
Student Introduction Prompt:

Take a few moments to introduce yourself. You don't have to be very personal, but you may want to consider including information about what you are studying, when you like to study or do school work, the general area in which you live, and your "study style" (do you like to get things done early, do you procrastinate, are you very verbal, do you need to see things done, etc.).

Look for others you may want to work with. You will choose groups soon and will be working with your group after Test 1.
Student-formed Groups - Icebreaker

**Gee Whiz Facts Prompt:**

Post a “trivia fact” about yourself.

Look for 2 or 3 “kindred spirits” and respond to their posts.
Find a Group Prompt:

Find 3 or 4 “kindred spirits” and form a group. Pay careful attention to details like day person vs. night owl and those who like to get assignments done right away vs. those who wait until the deadline approaches. Groups should have 4 or 5 members.

Discuss a name for your group with your group members.
Introduction Survey

**Primary:**
- Times/days available

**Secondary:**
- Career/major

**Balance, if able:**
- Online course experience
- Emotion toward math
- Study habits
Ramping Complexity - Assignment Instructions

Early group assignments should have heavily guided, step-by-step directions.

1. Answer the following questions
2. Compare answers with each other
3. Discuss disagreements and decide on a final submission

On the first assignments, students need to

- Build trust
- Establish expectations for deadlines and communication
- Practice collaboration in an online format
Ramping Complexity - Assignment Instructions

Later group assignments can be more complex.

Once expectations for each other are clear, students can tackle more complicated tasks.

- Projects
- Reports
- Presentations

(Instructors become increasingly comfortable with more complex assignments as they witness the success of earlier assignments.)
Effective Group Work - Accountability

Groups set their own expectations and timelines

Group members submit a confidential evaluation to the instructor after each assignment
Effective Group Work - Student Buy-in

Require students to set their own expectations

Foster interactions that are not connected to assignments

Increase student ownership, responsibility, and interdependence
Community: Instructor Presence
Student/Instructor Relationships - Building Sense of Instructor Presence

“Presence” is taken for granted in physical interactions, but requires work in online interactions.

- Personable introduction
- Seeing/hearing the instructor
- Quick response time
- Over-the-top kindness
- Invitation to continue conversations
Consistent Structure
Consistency and Branding

Students are better able to navigate the class if course elements are **consistent** and navigation is **predictable**.

When your consistent look is also unique to you and your class, it’s “**branding**.”

Examples of consistency/branding:

- Intro to instructional videos (3-5 seconds, same for all videos)
- Icons for course elements (assignment, quiz, discussion, lesson)
- Navigation through content is the same every week/lesson
- Weekly announcement/checklist/video
Evaluate

For the next **3 minutes**, look at one of your courses, and assess what you may want to change/improve.

- Is my **presence** in the course obvious, reliable, and frequent?
- Do students have ongoing, rich **community** with each other?
- Is the navigation through my course **consistent**, predictable, and branded?

**Write a list of 3-5 items** that, at some point in the future, would ideally become “exemplary.”
Brainstorm - Small Groups

For the next 3 minutes, share and discuss your lists with each other in small groups.

- Which of these items do I want to start on first?

Next, we will transition into a time when you can start tangibly making improvements.
Contact Information

(These slides are posted in the conference app)

Handout URL:
tinyurl.com/AMATYC-Workshop

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Frequently Asked Questions

How do I set up groups in my LMS?

**Blackboard:**
Blackboard provides a detailed walkthrough here:

- Tiny URL: [https://tinyurl.com/AMATYC-Blackboard-Groups](https://tinyurl.com/AMATYC-Blackboard-Groups)
- Permanent URL: [https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor/Interact/Course_Groups>Create_Groups](https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor/Interact/Course_Groups/Create_Groups)

**Canvas:**
Canvas has a FAQ for setting up groups:

- Tiny URL: [https://tinyurl.com/AMATYC-Canvas-Groups](https://tinyurl.com/AMATYC-Canvas-Groups)

They also provide a helpful video:

- Tiny URL: [https://tinyurl.com/AMATYC-Canvas-Groups-Video](https://tinyurl.com/AMATYC-Canvas-Groups-Video)
- Permanent URL: [https://community.canvaslms.com/videos/1113-groups-overview-instructors](https://community.canvaslms.com/videos/1113-groups-overview-instructors)

**Moodle:**
To help set up groups in Moodle, here is a video:

- Tiny URL: [https://tinyurl.com/AMATYC-Moodle-Groups](https://tinyurl.com/AMATYC-Moodle-Groups)
- Permanent URL: [https://youtu.be/Gaq1M9-ETtQ](https://youtu.be/Gaq1M9-ETtQ)

What tools should students use to collaborate?

We do not mandate using any particular tool. Student groups decide what works best for them. We’ve seen students use these tools frequently in the past:

- SMS text and group messages
- Texting apps like WhatsApp and GroupMe
- Google Docs, Google Sheets, and Google Slides allow simultaneous editing by multiple students
- Facetime, Duo, Skype, or other video conference call tools
- One or two groups per semester will decide to meet together in person
How do I manage dysfunctional groups?

This question is very natural and common. We generally create the course with high expectations, assuming students are goal-oriented and motivated. Sometimes, students have trouble adapting to your expectations. Here are some tips:

- Treat students like adults by setting clear standards and adhering to the natural consequences of failing to meet those standards.
  - Example: “Dear Jane, you did not fairly contribute to the first group assignment. You will not get credit for this assignment. Further, your group now has lost trust in you, and you will need to work hard to build that trust back up. Please reply with a detailed plan for how you intend to meet your group’s expectations on future assignments.”
- Give student groups freedom to set their own expectations, and make it clear that the rules set by the group are going to be enforced in grading.
- Ask students to resolve their differences internally before stepping in, yourself. If necessary, explain the benefits of learning to collaborate with people who disagree.
- Lots of communication early will have lasting benefits. It’s okay to warn students about inactivity on the first assignment. Clearly communicate drastic consequences of negligence (zero on the assignment, withdrawal, etc.).
- After the first assignment, don’t micromanage. Resist the urge to make sure every student is giving perfectly equal energy into the assignments. Rely on evaluations to reveal patterns of dysfunctional behavior.

How many students should I put in each group?

We have noticed that groups of 4-6 students tend to have a few advantages:
- They typically last the entire semester, rarely with a group decreasing to less than 3 students.
- They are small enough that students can still get to know each other.

The ideal size of student groups depends on several factors:
- What is the course level?
  - Introductory courses tend to have higher withdraw rates and may benefit from having slightly larger groups.
  - Terminal courses tend to have more mature students and can use smaller groups.
- What semester is it?
  - We have noticed a very different student population in Summer terms as compared to Fall/Spring terms. Summer students tend to be more motivated and mature. They can handle smaller groups.
  - Fall semesters may have a large ratio of first-semester freshmen, who may still be adapting to college life. Consider larger groups in Fall.
- What kinds of assignments are you using?
  - Will your assignments be long-term or short-term? Long, multi-part projects may benefit from larger groups to spread out the work.
How do I handle students who do not respond to the survey/icebreaker activities?

If you use one of our recommendations for forming student groups, you may have several students who do not participate.

- If you have 3-6 students who are inactive or unresponsive in the beginning of the semester, put them all in one group together. Send a very clear warning to this group right after groups are formed to let them know the reason they’re in the same group is they have one thing in common: they missed a deadline. Let them know that it’s not too late to establish good patterns, but they need to make a plan to get organized immediately.
- If you have only 1-2 students who miss the “grouping” activity, add them, individually, to another group. Send a stern warning to them that nonparticipation in group work will not be tolerated, (but don’t let the other students know that they missed a deadline).