Engaging students in online courses

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ABSTRACT

Online education is gradually being incorporated into college and university programs. It is proving to be an effective educational tool for our rapidly changing global marketplace. The fact that online courses operate differently than on ground courses cannot be ignored. Thus, they require teaching techniques and assessment techniques specifically geared for this educational experience. Group projects are quite familiar to students taking courses in the classroom. They are less familiar and perhaps feared by students taking courses online. The fact that participants in online courses do not physically interact with each other leads some to believe that this approach is not viable in an online course. This paper dispels this belief by discussing how group projects can be successfully incorporated into online courses. The paper also describes specific assessment tools which can be used to determine the success of online courses. Specifically, some formative assessment techniques are presented as particularly useful and appropriate for online courses.

Keywords: Formative assessment, feedback, group selection process, self-assessment, group norms, slacker.

INTRODUCTION

The technological advances leading into the 21st century present many challenges for higher education. College are concerned and deeply involved in the changes that are occurring in higher education. One dramatic change involves the development and increasing use of online education. Most university departments offer online courses. As the incorporation of such courses are increased in college programs educators recognize that they cannot be taught the same way as traditional classroom courses. They require the development of new and different teaching techniques. Such activities are well on their way. One activity which has been found to benefit students is group work (Rau and Heyl, 1990; Rinehart, 1999). Instructors of online courses often hesitate to have their students engage in this activity because of perceived drawbacks (Brooks and Ammons, 2003; Payne and Monk-Turner, 2005). However, this is a most beneficial learning tool which can and should be utilized in online courses. This paper will discuss the effective incorporation of this technique into online courses.

Associated with this is the need to develop and use effective assessment techniques. Assessment in online courses is quite different since instructors and students do not share physical space. Researchers have suggested that assessment techniques that determine the extent of student learning are very important for the student. They tell the student exactly what is important and, "how they should approach learning." (Garrison, 2011:14). This paper will also discuss some assessment tools that can improve online teaching.

The Benefits of Group Projects

Group projects serve many purposes and have many advantages for students. Research indicates that students can increase their body of knowledge by working with other students (Jones, 2006; Payne and Monk-Turner, 2006). Group projects enable students to develop skills that are needed for successful professional careers such as critical thinking, problem solving, and interpersonal skills. The ever changing global markets are making these skills vital. Thus, collaboration is a key factor in a successful career. Group projects provide the opportunity for students to experience the importance of collaboration. Students engaged in group projects learn how to communicate effectively with other students. They learn how to identify goals and objectives. They learn how to assign tasks and deal with conflicts. They learn how to share the credit for work done. The students are actually learning what they need to be successful. They are learning how to traverse interpersonal relationships

A successful educational experience requires students to feel integrated in the educational environment. Students taking online courses often feel disconnected from the institution. Group projects give students the opportunity to reduce this distance and become more familiar with their fellow students. This familiarity is achieved through working together during the course of the semester. The students begin to develop relationships which would not have occurred otherwise. These relationships are not only beneficial to the students but to the institution as well. When students feel connected they are more likely to continue their education at the institution and, thus, increase retention (Hartman, Bjerregaard, and Lord, 2009).

Yet another benefit of group projects is that they allow students to really learn specific aspects of a topic. Group projects involve intensive examination and collaboration. It is through this process that students gain a better understanding of the subject matter.

There are also criticisms of group work. Students often feel it is unfair to have their grades determined by the work of other students who may not be pulling their weight. Students often deal with this by ignoring the "slacker" and assuming the extra work in order to complete the project on time. This contributes to students negative feelings about group projects. There are ways to deal with the criticisms of group work.

Dealing With the Challenges to Group Projects

It is most important for the instructor to understand that simply labeling an assignment as a group project does not insure that it will be a successful group project. The instructor must design the project to require collective participation. Scherling (2011: 15) provides a good example of a collaborative project:

> For example, analyzing an individual's behavior from the perspective of multiple theories and recommending an appropriate response to the behavior requires students to collectively reach a consensus. A group project requiring students to examine multiple theories and present a PowerPoint presentation on the theories allows students to distribute the workload with each group member creating a slide reporting on a particular theory.

The characteristics of the online learning experience must also be considered. Students may have different schedules. It is unreasonable to expect all group members to be able to respond to a request within 24 hours. It is, therefore, essential that the instructor provide enough time for groups to discuss and reach an agreement on decisions affecting the project. Even two or three weeks may not provide sufficient time for group decisions. It is recommended that group projects extend over several weeks and incorporate the general content of the course.

Group selection and formation are critical to creating a valuable group learning experience. This process could begin with an online forum in which students introduce themselves, discuss approaches to the group project, and ultimately select their team mates. It is important to have the students select their own teams based on the information they obtain from the forum. The instructor should provide information on the various roles group members can play such as leader or editor. The instructor may want to go further and suggest roles for the group members. This is fine, however, it is important to urge students to construct and allocate these roles based on their own unique experiences in online courses. Students may consider their individual strengths and weaknesses and self-select the role they want to play in the group. The instructor must keep in mind that, "each group is unique and the group process is an interaction between individual characteristic, experience, and understanding of the assignment." (Morgan, Cameron, and Williams, 2009:292).

The first requirement of the group should be the establishment of group norms. This is essential to the success of the project. The students should decide what acceptable and unacceptable behavior for the group is. This will give group members the self-assurance to confront group members not obeying the norms since they were created and agreed upon by the group.

Successful groups require that the members develop a sense of trust. If trust is not developed with group members, it may prevent other important social interactions from occurring. Research has also identified other characteristics which are important to online group work. They include decision-making skills, consensus building, collegiality, active participation, and conflict resolution. (Morgan, Cameron, and Williams, 2009). "Students in online settings may look for these skills in their fellow group members as they work toward developing familiarity and supportive relationships." (Morgan, Cameron, and Williams, 2009:286).

A theory of group development created by Tuckman in 1965 describes the three stages of group development. "The forming stage involves the review of the project and the attempt by all members to understand and accept each other. The storming stage involves disagreements about team roles, opportunities, and direction. In the norming stage the group roles become clearer. The group has more structure and members begin to trust each other. In the final stage, the performing stage, the group is working well and the members trust and are committed to the group." (Hansen, 2006:13). The development of specific roles for group members reduces the chances that any group member will become a slacker. It is essential that students understand the stages of group development as they begin to form their work groups.

Successful group projects require meaningful assignments. The best group projects are those that deal with real-world problems. This motivates students because it gives them an opportunity to use the knowledge they have acquired to solve problems. It allows them to put the theories and concepts they have learned to the real test. Real world problems also include encouraging the development of conflict management skills among the group members. It will enable the students to deal with "slackers" within the group rather than ignoring them and assuming additional work. This is an important skill to develop and transfer to the professional workplace.

In addition to projects being meaningful and significant the workload expected should be manageable. If students feel that they have been assigned too much work, they will not view the group project experience as the valuable learning tool it is.

The group project process requires group members to participate. If group members request information or feedback from other members, it should be provided. It is up to the instructor to monitor this flow of information and evaluate its content in order to ensure that each group member is contributing to the final product. Research suggests the use of interim reports to assess the progress of the group. It is recommended that there be three reports submitted during the course of the project. Each report should indicate the group achievements. The first report should concentrate on reporting about team management. The second report concentrates on the progress towards project completion. The third report which should be due approximately two weeks before the final project is due should report on dealing with the final aspects of the project. (Hansen, 2006). The instructor would be providing feedback after each report. This would provide "slacking" students with a warning and an opportunity to improve their performance.

Another technique which may make group members less inclined to engage in "slacking" would be to have the instructor require each group member to evaluate the other members as part of the grade for the project. The group members would then be aware that every member does not receive the same grade unless every member contributes to the final product. It is, of course, possible that students may not be fair in their evaluations of other students. It is up to the instructor to review these evaluations carefully and determine their weight towards the final grade.

The project should end with the requirement that each participant complete a self-assessment of their work. This allows students to carefully examine their experience and consider any changes or modification they would make in future group projects. "Self-reflection promotes learning built on previous experiences in order to enhance future experiences."(Scherling, 2011:16).

It is also important for the instructor to know how the students felt about their collaborative experience. How effective was it as a learning tool? This information is vital to the instructor. It would allow the instructor to make any adjustments necessary to improve the learning experience of the students.

Formative Assessment

It is clear that online education will continue to be a part of higher education. Its continued success requires careful assessment to insure that the educational objectives are met. There are various assessment tools. Online courses require assessment tools that meet the needs of an online course. Instructors are familiar with the various summative assessment techniques. They are used to determine how much students have learned about a particular subject. They are important as a means of grading students. Formative assessments are assessments for learning. They indicate what the student is learning and how the student is learning. They serve to support learning during the process of learning. Such assessments do not involve grading. They check the student's understanding and help the instructor with future instruction. They also provide information to the students so they can improve. The feedback students receive from formative assessments can encourage student engagement and increase their enthusiasm to learn. Formative assessment works well for online courses.

Feedback is an essential component of the assessment of online courses. There are certain precautions which must be observed. Brown, Bull, and Pendlebury (1997) explain that, "the feedback provided has to be specific, accurate, timely, clear, focused upon the attainable and expressed in a way which will encourage a person to think and if he or she thinks it is necessary, to change." (Jenkins, 2010:566).

The feedback provided must be carefully considered for it to be of value in the assessment process. Formative assessment can be a valuable learning tool but its effectiveness as such is reduced significantly if students are not adequately instructed as to what they are expected to produce. Appropriate information reduces the chances of the student misinterpreting the assessment and presenting an assignment for formative feedback that does not address the question. (Rust, Price, and O'Donovan, 2003). In addition, feedback should emphasize the development and mastery of skills rather than focusing on mistakes. Mistakes should be treated as a learning opportunity.

> By showing students specific misunderstandings or errors that frequently occur in a content area or skill set, and showing them how they can adjust their approach to the task, students can see what they need to do to maximize their performance. Feedback about their progress in learning gives students hope and positive expectations for themselves. (Cauley and McMillan, 2010:3).

Formative assessment in online courses should emphasize mastering the task and achieving the goal. This includes encouraging the student to work toward a better understanding of the subject. Evaluations should avoid the use of practices that make the student afraid of failure. It is better to praise and reward students who learn from their mistakes.

Thus, when giving feedback for formative assessment activities, teachers should attribute results to student efforts and then explore changes in instruction and learning tasks, which suggests that a lack of success is also related to a factor that a student can modify. Formative assessment without effort attributions and instruction modifications that support developing understanding can leave students feeling hopeless. Examples of the right kind of feedback include: "It looks like the extra effort that you put into studying has paid off" and "Look how you've improved since you tried a different strategy.' (Cauley and McMillan, 2010:4).

There is a tendency to resist the use of formative assessment because of the time factor. Instructors may fear that they will not be able to cover all the material if they engage in formative assessment. Attempting to cover as much material as possible does not ensure that students are learning. Without understanding what is being retained, the push to cover more material may be a wasted effort. Formative assessments do not take a long time. They can be quite efficient for use on a regular basis. The importance of such assessment is described by Chase (1999:9) as, "an essential part of teaching effectiveness by engaging students and their instructors in a wide range of learning opportunities that acknowledge student achievement, while informing changes in instructional plans and strategies, as well as leading to curriculum improvements." Thus, it may include any techniques that both instructors and students can use to improve teaching and learning. Boston (2002) suggests that assessment becomes formative when the data collected is used to adjust teaching and learning to meet the needs of the students. This data can be used to promote active and engaged learning because the instructor now has a better idea of the students' learning style, needs, and interests.

EXAMPLES OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Student self-assessment

Formative assessment provides a great opportunity for student self-assessment. Student self-assessment is not just checking test responses. It is a learning process. Students evaluate their thinking process and begin to develop techniques to improve understanding. Student assessment has been described as a three step process. It includes:

1. Self-monitoring. This is where the students evaluate their own work.
2. Self-evaluation. They look for differences between their current work and preferred performance.
3. They develop and use new learning activities to improve their skills.

One critical advantage of student self-assessment is that it provides students with a better understanding of assignments and what is needed to master the task (the learning goal). "When students work toward meeting clear learning targets, they have high expectations for success." (Cauley and McMillan, 2010:5). Self-assessment also supports students in their decision making process. Students learn to decide what has to be done and when to do it.

Self-assessment encourages self-efficacy which is defined as, "the belief an individual holds about their ability to perform the task at hand." (Cauley and McMillan, 2010:5). A student achieves a sense of high efficacy when they have the confidence to believe that if they complete the task appropriately, they can be successful.

Reflection Paper

The reflection paper allows the student to reflect and analyze a particular assignment or discussion. It can include a summary of the various discussion posts. This technique allows students to really learn the material. It is, in effect, incorporated into the student's knowledge base.

The Minute Paper

This tool allows instructors to understand the learning requirements of the class and adjust his or her instruction accordingly. The minute paper might include such questions as:
1. What is the most important thing you learned today?
2. Do you still have questions? If so, what are they? (Angelo and Cross, 1993).

"The first question in the Minute Paper directs learners to focus on what is being learned. The second question seeks to determine how well student learning is proceeding." (Vonderwell, 2004:29).

The use of the minute paper allows for ongoing assessment of both learning and teaching practices. The responses given by the students provide a means for identifying specific learning needs. It then helps the instructor modify instruction accordingly. The minute paper creates a way of communicating between student and teacher. Students think about what they have learned and look for areas to continue their analysis.

Mosteller (1989) suggests the muddiest point technique. The question asked is, "what was the muddiest point?" which intends to find out what students find most confusing or least confusing about the lesson." (Vonderwell and Boboc, 2013:24).

Role Play

Instructors can assign specific roles to students in discussion posts. Such roles can help students assess their own work as well as support peer learning. The roles might include facilitator of the discussion or summarizer. Students can then monitor their own learning and progress.

Hook Questions

They may be defined as questions arising from a particular topic discussed or a reading assignment. The hook question can be posted prior to the discussion to give students a chance to prepare. The instructor can analyze the responses and possibly discover misconceptions which can be addressed.
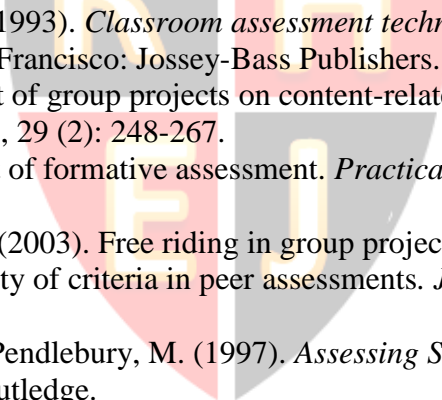
Questions Wall

This features different questions from both students and instructors on topics of interest to them yet part of the course. It works well because the distinctions between student and instructor are not there. It is informal and non-structured. It, thus, provides greater opportunity for interaction.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The growth of online education makes the development of teaching techniques that work well in a non-classroom setting essential. Group projects provide students with a good learning experience as well as an opportunity to engage in activities which are transferable to the workplace. Assessment is a particularly important part of online education. The lack of face to face contact can make it difficult to determine the extent to which material has been successfully delivered and understood by the students. Meaningful formative assessments incorporated within the activities of the course allow the instructors and the students to better understand their progress.

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