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TIPS FROM THE PROS

Designing Group-Based Learning Activities

Angela Heath

For a while in my online teaching career, I'd been reluctant to use group learning techniques with my students. My students are primarily undergraduate majors who have been out of school for a while and generally need more hand-holding (or so I thought). What I've learned after many years online is that even though my students work individually, they also work collectively as a group. In fact, my wonderful students often initiate working in teams when discussing issues in the forums, studying for the midterm, and giving each other advice for tackling the final project. I realized that group learning was already being used in my courses, so I concluded that I could expose my students to group-based learning activities and assignments that would benefit them in the long run.

When designing group-based activities, an instructor should consider these areas:

- Group formation (how the groups are formed)
- Group roles (assigning leaders and other roles)
- Group conflicts (dealing with issues and conflicts)

How groups are formed Instructor-selected groups.

Depending on the learning activity, students can be assigned to groups based on their background and experiences, or they can be randomly assigned. While randomly

Students are required to interview each other by looking at their profiles and asking each other questions about their skill levels.

assigning groups is easier and less time consuming, group assignments can be made if an instructor has more information on each student based on their profiles, interests, and skill levels. Assigning groups is certainly worth it in the long run. The main disadvantage to instructor-selected groups is that group members may not work well together and students may complain about the fact that they were not able to choose their own teams.

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Online Videos That Transform Students into Teachers

Elizabeth Elam

An effective online learning environment cannot be sustained without the development of a learning community. Students must be engaged and feel that their voices are not only being heard, but are a key component of the instruction. In an online grammar classroom, students must also fulfill the need for a social connection—they should feel that they are coming to class, just as they would to a seated course on campus (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). In my online Grammar 382 class, students make connections through shared ideas and thoughts, and they establish a sense of presence through the online learning community by creating student-generated videos. These videos transform the learning process and allow students to work collaboratively to create an online mini-lesson on any grammatical topic taught during the semester. While lessons

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How to Design Online Courses to Enhance Student Engagement

Meixun Sinky Zheng

When designed and implemented effectively, online learning holds huge potential for education, but many online courses that we see nowadays are not designed based on sound instructional design and adult learning principles. Simply providing students with online content and expecting them to learn on their own is not an effective approach to online learning. Such online courses don't provide students with the high-quality learning experience they deserve. Informed by research and drawn from my years of experience teaching and designing online courses, I will share some online learning design strategies and tips that you can implement to enhance students' online engagement and learning.

Don't do online learning blindly. Before you decide to implement online learning, it is important to think critically about why you are doing it. You don't want to do online learning simply because others are doing it. If you are considering redesigning a face-to-face course for online delivery, the first thing to do is to evaluate whether online learning is a good fit for your course.

Below are a few questions to ask yourself before implementing online or blended learning:

- What is not working well in my current face-to-face course?
- What is the nature of the content (i.e., is it technical or fundamental)?
- Will it work better if I move those modules online?
- Will I redesign only a few modules or the entire course for online delivery?

Don't literally translate face-to-face content online. One pitfall in online learning design is that some instructors simply move the content and activities from the face-to-face course to the online platform without making any changes. The issue is that not everything that works in a face-to-face environment will work in an online environment. Whole-class discussion with 60 students might work pretty well in the classroom, but the large class size might pose challenges when the instructor implements whole-class online discussion. In this case, it is better to break students down into small groups for online discussion forum activities.

Get students well oriented. If you redesign part of your face-to-face course for online delivery, it is also important to give students the rationale for why you have done so to get their buy-in. Explain to them how the online or blended format will benefit their learning. You can even show them evidence from research.

Sometimes we might assume that our students have grown up with technology, so they can easily navigate the online learning environment. Nevertheless, being tech dependent is different from being tech savvy. Additionally, being tech savvy in daily life is different from being tech savvy in the learning context. Therefore, it helps to give clear instructions on how to get started. You can do this by creating a two-minute course overview video trailer, providing a virtual walkthrough of the course, or giving students a syllabus quiz to make sure they read the syllabus carefully. For those who haven't had

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online learning experiences, share with them some online learning strategies, including how to manage their time.

Communicate high mutual expectations early on. At the beginning of the course, let students know what you expect of them as well as what they can expect from you. Expectations are mutual. Your expectations for them help guide their efforts. Letting them know what they can expect from you shows your commitment to their online success. For example, you can tell them how soon you will respond to their e-mail inquiries and how soon the grades for assignments will be in. Put this information in the syllabus and remind them of the expectations more than once throughout the course.

Provide a well-organized online course structure. Clear organization is the key to success in any learning environment. If students have to click on several tabs to locate the information they need, they might feel frustrated. It is a good idea to keep things organized by linking them to a central location for ease of access. For instance, you can put readings and viewings, assignments, and supplementary resources all within one module on the Modules/Lessons page in your learning management system. Students can easily access what they need for that particular module with only one click.

Use multimedia-rich online content. Don't restrict yourself to slides and book chapters. Students find online content that is too text-heavy boring. Most learning management systems allow you to easily incorporate videos, websites, games, and so on to continuously engage students and to help them understand the content. You can easily create interactive content with such tools as SoftChalk, Captivate,

or Storyline.

Support online interaction and community building. One of the most important factors contributing to student success in both the face-to-face and online classroom is social interaction. Your online learning activities should support the following three types of interaction:

Not everything that works in a face-to-face environment will work in an online environment.

- **Learning–content interaction.** Students need to actively interact with the content in order to make meaning. To help them develop a deeper understanding of the content, you can ask them to reflect on what they have read or viewed and discuss how they can apply their new learning in future practice.
- **Learner–learner interaction.** The potential of peer learning is huge. You can leverage peer learning by asking students to conduct peer review, work on collaborative projects using tools such as Wiki and Google Apps, and participate in online discussion forums.
- **Learner–instructor interaction.** Your visibility in the online course might greatly impact students' satisfaction, motivation, and online learning outcomes. You can easily enhance your online presence by replying to students' discussion forum posts, summarizing each online module, asking them questions, providing feedback to them, and so on.

Use different methods to assess student learning at a higher level. Don't restrict yourself to quizzes or exams. While quizzes and exam are helpful in some

contexts, they can't always capture student learning accurately. Using a combination of multiple assessment approaches, you can assess their learning at a higher level on Bloom's revised taxonomy. You can combine quizzes, discussion forums, reflective journals, self-assessment, peer assessment, and hands-on application projects.

Finally, remember that no matter what assessment approaches you use, it is extremely important to provide timely, personalized, and actionable feedback to students.

Meixun Sinky Zheng is an assistant professor at the University of the Pacific. Join Dr. Zheng's seminar "How to Design and Facilitate Online Discussions That Improve Student Learning and Engagement" on May 17 to learn more about this topic (www.magnapubs.com/online-seminars/online-discussions-that-improve-student-learning-14152-1.html). @

NEXT MONTH'S TOPICS

Teaching with Feed-based Social Media

A Three-Tiered Discussion Format for Better Learning

Retrieval Practice in Online Teaching

Channel your Inner Avatar to Add Interest to Your Online Course

Three Keys to a Strong Start in Your Online Course

Easy Ways to Create Video Welcomes and Bios

Student-selected work groups.

Student-selected groups are a great option because they empower students to work with others they are interested in. On the downside, this option can be a bit time consuming if not managed properly. In my project-based business courses, I allow students the freedom to select their own work groups, but I provide clear ground rules about the overall time frame and finality of this process. These are some of my ground rules:

- Students are required to interview each other by looking at their profiles and asking each other questions about their skill levels. I provide an interview sheet of suggested questions.
- For semester-long projects, I give students a full two weeks to form groups. For shorter projects, I give students one week to form their groups.
- After teams are formed, students are not allowed to change them.

Methods

To facilitate self-selection into groups, I suggest giving your students methods for ensuring that this process goes smoothly. This helps students get started with the self-selection process, feel more confident about their selections, and resolve any problems that may arise. Three of my favorite methods for my online classes are polling, e-mailing, and cloud-based file sharing. In each method, the students manage themselves; I only facilitate the overall progress of the group selection process to ensure there are no problems.

Electronic Polling. Encourage students to use online polling websites (e.g., poll daddy.com or polleverywhere.com) that host quick polls. These tools are easy to use and allow students to get a quick measure of who in their class might

be interested in joining their group. I encourage students to describe their interest and proposed topics, and then ask questions in the poll like, “When are you available to meet?” or, “How far along in the program are you?” The aim is for students to audition their project ideas to their fellow classmates and form groups based on commonalities in scheduling, academic interests, and so on.

Group e-mailing. Ask students to send out class e-mails within the learning management system (LMS) soliciting for team members. For the e-mail message, ask students to describe themselves along with their work experiences and interests. E-mailing is such a familiar form of communication that students feel more comfortable throughout the process. I find with this approach, my students can usually form groups in a much shorter period of time. Once groups are chosen, students send me an e-mail introducing the group.

Cloud-based profile lists. Use Google Docs to share a profile list that includes the student’s name, contact information, a link to the student’s LMS profile, times available, and matches. Students enter their information online so other students can learn about them through their profiles. Students then connect with each other based on desired profiles. When students make matches, they indicate this on the list by entering their names next to each other.

Assigning roles in groups

In most assignments, students can determine who needs to do what, but roles in work groups often need to be defined beforehand in learning activities. In these cases, I will define the roles in the group in terms of the tasks that need to be done. Once the roles are chosen, students are asked to notify me of which students will handle which

tasks. Depending on the nature of the project, these are the roles I use:

- Leader/manager
- Coordinator/secretary/timekeeper
- Developer/webmaster
- Researcher
- Evaluator/reviewer/recorder
- Copyeditor/proofreader
- Client contact

Tips for handling leadership responsibilities

For most of my group learning assignments, students decide among themselves how to divide responsibilities. Oftentimes, the hardest group role to decide upon is the leader of the group. Many students feel apprehensive about taking on a leadership role for a group assignment. Over the years, I have used the following strategies to help students overcome this challenge:

Clearly define what the group leader needs to do.

In some cases, the leader will engage in the same activities as the other group members but will take on additional leadership tasks such as putting together final submissions.

Allow students to form co-leadership roles.

I offer students the option to form co-leaderships. I allow students this option for all my group assignments. It ensures that students who take on leadership roles feel more supported and less stressed about completing the work by themselves and for the group.

Communicate directly with the group leader(s).

The group leader communicates with me throughout the life of the project about issues and problems with the project. I facilitate this by instituting interim progress e-mails with the group leaders with the following questions:

Three Ways to Use Google Drive to Improve Teaching Efficiency

Curby Alexander

Any teacher will tell you that they could use more time. One way to save time is with the Google Drive suite of tools. These free apps are not only powerful in themselves, but a host of add-ons have been developed around them that increase their power. Many faculty are not aware of these add-ons, but I have found that they turn Google apps into must-use systems that save me time in my teaching. Here are three uses of Google apps that I would recommend.

Leaderboards

Google Sheets is a cloud-based spreadsheet with most of the features of its desktop counterpart, Excel, but with added functionality through a wide variety of third-party add-ons. Google Sheets can be shared, edited collaboratively, and embedded in a Learning Management System or other web page.

One possibility Google Sheets opens up is adding leaderboards to your course. Leaderboards provide up-to-the-minute updates on top performers within a group, such as golf, music charts, and high scores on a video game. This gamification strategy can also be applied to a learning environment, and there is evidence to suggest providing students the opportunity to compete against each other for the top spot on the leaderboard improves student outcomes (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014).

Not every student is inherently competitive, so this strategy may not resonate with every student. Some learners may be satisfied in knowing their scores are meeting expectations, and the leaderboard is a good way to provide feedback to students about their progress.

Instructors can place themselves in the leaderboard with scores that represent baseline expectations. If students are able to stay above the instructor's line, they know they are progressing satisfactorily.

Doctopus is a Google Sheets add-on that automatically creates documents for every student on a class roster.

For an instructor, the information at the bottom of the leaderboard is just as important as the data on the top. In especially large classes or classes that meet only online, instructors need to know who is falling behind. Struggling students can often be guided back on track with some help from the instructor, but the instructor must first be able to identify those students. Grades are one measure of course progress, but by the time assignments are scored and grades are entered, the student is several weeks behind. A leaderboard provides more timely feedback to the instructor, who can use this tool as a way to quickly identify students who are falling behind.

Leaderboards are easy to create in a Google Sheet using a pivot table. For more information about setting up a leaderboard in Google Sheets, refer to <https://goo.gl/KSYuV8>.

Quizzing

Google Forms allows instructors to collect a variety of data from students quickly and easily. Instructors can use this tool to poll students during class, to conduct

surveys, or to assign weekly quizzes. Responses are stored in a spreadsheet, where data can be calculated, merged, or exported into another format.

Even though Google Forms is both simple and powerful on the back end, it has some limitations. For instance, if a student submits a response through Google Forms, there is no way to see whether the submission was received. Unlike an LMS with a two-way interface (i.e., Instructor and Student view), Google Forms is unidirectional, with no way to view previous submissions.

However, instructors can use the FormMule add-on (<http://cloudlab.newvisions.org/add-ons/formmule>) to generate automated messages upon each form submission. FormMule allows the instructor to merge data from the spreadsheet back into an e-mail message to the student, and messages can be programmed to send immediately upon submission, at a specific time during the day, or manually.

An important characteristic of spreadsheets is the ability to apply calculations to large sets of data. For example, using the SUM formula will automatically add all (or selected) values in a row, which can then be applied to all subsequent rows. Instructors can choose from hundreds of formulas to perform calculations on student data submitted through a form (such as answers to a quiz), which saves time and reduces the likelihood of mistakes. The CopyDown add-on (<http://cloudlab.newvisions.org/add-ons/copydown>) will automatically apply formula calculations in the second row of the spreadsheet to all subsequent form submissions so instructors do not

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are based on skills taught in class, students metacognitively begin to think as teachers. Over the years, I have found that when students take ownership of the material presented online, they enjoy the process even more.

I have allowed students in my online Grammar 382 course to pick from any topic we have discussed throughout the semester. I have found that when students have greater autonomy, the interest in the project and levels of creativity are higher. Over the semesters, I have seen topics ranging from homonyms, proper pronoun usage of the objective case *me*, and identifying noun clauses to enhance formal writing. Students know that their goal is to identify a topic and start thinking about how they would teach the lesson. I require students to follow a lesson plan template, as many of my students are preservice teachers. I prefer students to follow the same template so projects can be relatively uniform. The template I provide includes an outline, an overarching objective, an introduction of the lesson, specific objectives outlining what the teacher will accomplish, procedures for conducting the lesson plan, and a closing/evaluation process. When I can anticipate their questions and provide a format that is easily followed, students can move more quickly into the filming stages. The last thing I discuss is time. I require the final product to be at least seven minutes long, but not longer than ten minutes. I also want them to narrate, edit, and present a polished piece. This requires planning. I often give my students a planning day so they can get together and iron out logistics.

My online grammar students typically record their videos using

their iPhones so they can transfer them to iMovies and later edit them. They have portability and transferability with this format, and students are proficient with editing skills. Once the video has been filmed, the student-editor begins the revision process. In Canvas, we have several locations for uploading media files. However, students typically collaborate and express what parts need to be deleted and what parts should be saved before they send me the final product. I encourage students to send me a rough draft file or share a YouTube link, as groups tend to work independently on various mediums. Once I have reviewed their draft, I encourage students to include narrator voices, type text in the introduction and conclusion, and add music to enhance the final product. The structure of the videos typically includes an introduction, the lesson plan, and then an evaluation part, which lets students reflect on the project and what they have learned.

Typically, one student is assigned to be the producer and shoots the entire video while the group teaches the lesson. Students can create videos from any convenient location. Students will add text directly to the video so that the words appear on the screen at appropriate moments. Often, students have the words appear on the screen in a motion effect on the video, or the words appear to fly in. Students love this part because they can create a polished piece that has personality and flare.

While this can be a challenging assignment, I have discovered that not only do students enjoy working with each other, but they also build a community of learning during this process. I require students to share the final product with their peers, and I expect them to use the rubric provided on Canvas. While

I assign final grades, students give positive feedback, which is helpful during the revision stage. Students can access videos directly on Canvas or create a YouTube link for others to access. Sharing the final video production works especially well for preservice teachers who are looking to build a repository for future lessons.

What I enjoy the most about these culminating video productions is the sense of pride that the students have when we watch them. In my online grammar classes, I reserve the last day of the semester as movie day. We watch, laugh, and enjoy the final products. Students comment on how much they enjoy seeing themselves on screen, but secretly, they have a strong sense of accomplishment. This is such an amazing product because students work hard to exceed my expectations. I am thrilled with their collaboration, creativity, and professionalism.

For me, success means providing online students with the opportunity to build on the lessons discussed in the semester and turn them into creative masterpieces. I love that this assignment requires students to think like teachers and gives them the opportunity to engage in digital media, which reinforces knowledge and allows students to share goals and explore ideas (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

References

Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (2007). *Building online learning communities: Effective strategies for the virtual classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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- How are you feeling about the project?
- Any concerns?
- Anything I can help you with?

Dealing with conflicts

Many times, students who work in groups will experience conflict with members of the groups. Most of the conflicts stem from individual group members failing to carry

their own weight. This could be due to attendance problems, lack of interest, or just irresponsibility. I usually let students resolve their own conflicts within the group while I take on the role of mediator. I also like to give students some tools to help prevent conflicts:

- Meeting note templates—Groups are required to document meetings, attendance, and so on.
- Participation logs—Groups are required to report on each mem-

ber's participation in the project at different stages.

- Mediation sessions—In cases of deep conflicts, I run mediation sessions in Skype where group members can hash out their difficulties and move forward in a more productive manner.

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have to continually open the spreadsheet and apply the calculation to the new submissions.

When coupled with FormMule, instructors can calculate data automatically and send an immediate message to students confirming their submission. The confirmation can include such information as the time the submission was received, the score on a quiz, or a copy of the answers the students submitted for their records. Not only do students get immediate feedback from the instructor, they can also have the assurance their answers were received and a receipt to prove it.

Assignments

Some instructors prefer to have students complete assignments using Google Docs rather than creating their own documents and uploading to the LMS. Google Docs has some obvious advantages over traditional word processors, such as a detailed version history, a simple interface that incorporates comments and track changes, and the ability to collaborate with multiple users at once. Students can share their documents with instructors, and when they are done with a paper, they simply quit typing and walk away. In essence, the minute the document is shared, it is

also submitted.

Of course, the ability to share a document can also be a liability. If students do not share the document, the instructor does not have access. Keeping track of shared documents and following up with students who have not provided access or editing permissions can become an administrative burden many instructors would rather avoid. This constraint of Google Docs should not be a reason to deter interested instructors from this tool. Doctopus (<http://cloudlab.newvisions.org/add-ons/doctopus>) is a Google Sheets add-on that automatically creates documents for every student on a class roster.

After instructors have loaded their roster into Doctopus, they can decide how to share documents with students, such as creating a copy of the same assignment for all students, giving students different assignments, or adding them as editors on the same document. One convenient aspect of distributing assignments in this way is where the documents are stored: the instructor's Google Drive. The instructor owns and has access to the documents throughout the entire process, and can view the latest changes, provide corrective feedback, and restrict access once the due date for the assignment has passed. An additional advantage to creating Google Docs

for students with Doctopus is that the document is created from a template rather than a blank file. Instructors can provide instructions, links to resources, examples (e.g., how to format an APA citation), or an outline for the assignment within the document itself. This type of scaffolding may help students who are emerging into the realm of scholarly writing and need substantive support and guidance on their journey to becoming proficient college-level writers.

The integration of Google apps in Drive such as Sheets, Docs, and Forms presents a variety of ways to make your teaching more efficient. With practice, patience, and creativity, instructors can customize these tools to create meaningful learning experiences for students, and also to help instructors save time and effort while maintaining high-quality teaching practices.

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Hamari, J., Koivisto, J., & Sarsa, H. (2014, January). Does gamification work?—A literature review of empirical studies on gamification. In *Proceedings of the 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, Hawaii, USA, January 6–9, 2014.

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Infographics Assignments for Better Learning

John Orlando

Most faculty require students to present the results of their research and thinking in text form—the ubiquitous “paper” assignment. But in the real world, information is often presented in visual form.

Infographics are the best method to display certain types of content because it is often much easier to see the significance of information in visual form. A chart of the S&P 500 demonstrates how it rises and falls over time, but shows it is generally on an upward trajectory, displaying the wisdom of investing for the long haul. The daily values are far less meaningful than the pattern, and infographics distill information down to those patterns.

Having students represent information in infographics helps them look at information with an eye toward its significance and how best to represent that. Because the importance of S&P performance is in its relation to other investment options, the designer might superimpose graphs of other investment performances over it for comparison. Thus, infographic assignments teach students both to look at information for its significance and how best to represent that significance to others, valuable 21st-century skills.

While a chart is a form of infographic, faculty can force even deeper learning by requiring students to move beyond simple charts. In Randy Krum’s (2014) excellent book *Cool Infographics: Effective Communication with Data Visualization and Design*, Krum illustrates how we are bombarded with information by showing a graphic of multiple newspaper images, with the headline reading that we are exposed to the equivalent of 174 newspapers of informa-

tion every day. He is drawing on our experience with newspapers and the knowledge that we read, at most, parts of one per day, to demonstrate the impossibility of absorbing all of the information we are given.

Thus, infographic assignments allow students to draw on their creativity to move beyond the simple graph to represent the significance of information. It also forces students to think of analogies that resonate with the modern reader. Perhaps the modern student would

Faculty can force even deeper learning by requiring students to move beyond simple charts for displaying data.

represent the amount of information we encounter each day with images of 140-character Tweets. This is a level of thinking that is not forced by traditional papers.

Faculty can use their own creativity to think of ways that students can represent information in their courses. Once the assignment is determined, here are a variety of systems that students can use to develop captivating infographics.

Canva (www.canva.com). Canva is an online design tool that can be used to create images with graphics. This system is designed to produce eye-catching graphics for a variety of uses, such as posters, presentations, e-magazines, and the like. You start by choosing a format, anything from a flyer to a menu to a Twitter post to an infographic, and then choose a template that will determine the overall design of your infographic. Each template comes

with a layout and sample content. Just take the initial layout and swap in the content you want with the placeholder content you are given, including images and text. The process is remarkably simple and takes only a few minutes to learn. Take a look at this brief tutorial on Canva to see how it works, and share it with your students to get them started: youtu.be/ZGdJMhEybpE.

Visme (www.visme.co). Visme is similar to Canva in that it is an online graphics program that comes with a large set of templates and formats. But it adds to this functionality some interesting features, such as animations and embedded YouTube videos, that your students might want to incorporate into their infographics. The free version is fairly limited, and it includes the Visme logo on the creations, but there is special pricing for education if students want to use the premium version.

iVisual Info Touch (AppStore). Those with an iPad might want to look at iVisual Info Touch, an iPad app that comes in a free or paid version, for developing their work. It has a drag-and-drop interface like Canva, though with fewer templates and image options built into the free version. In fact, you can only import your own images if you get the \$2.99 version, but it works well for very simple infographics.

Try infographic assignments to incite creativity and deeper thinking in your students.

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