

# Conferencing Strategies for Teaching At a Distance



An ION Resource  
[Illinois Online Network](#)



# Synergy in the Virtual Classroom

- Synergy: The dynamic energy created when participants interact.
- The sum of the energy created is greater than the energy of the individual efforts.
- This atmosphere is highly conducive to learning.



# Synergy in the Virtual Classroom

- The concept is not a new one.
- Every faculty member has experienced this phenomenon in the traditional classroom.



Can this atmosphere be recreated  
online?

- Yes!



## How Is This Atmosphere Created?

- The facilitator (instructor) is responsible for creating this atmosphere.
- The online climate must be open, honest, sincere and conducive to learning.



## How Is This Atmosphere Created?

- **Not** created by an online class with only lecture notes and quizzes.
- Often created during discussions and sharing of ideas.



# Collaborative/Cooperative Learning

- Two or more students working together to learn.
- Participants have different abilities and use a variety of activities to master the material.
- Each member is responsible both for learning and for helping teammates learn.



# Values of Cooperative Learning

- As employees students will work as part of a team.
- More effective than individualistic efforts in promoting cognitive development, self-esteem, and positive student-student relationships.



## Some Interactions Are Not Collaborative

- Online tutorial help is interactive with another individual, but not collaborative.
- Online activities need to be designed specifically to promote collaboration.



## How to Create Synergy and Collaboration

- The synergy produced by **discussion** is probably the most important learning tool of an online course.
- Collaboration begins with the discussion tool.



## Clearly Communicate Your Expectations

- Provide an explicit policy on communications.
- Always include a grade for participation.
- Grade on the quality of the work.



## Provide a Weekly Agenda

- What will be covered.
- Assignments for the week.
- Due dates.



## Help Students Focus on Material

- Limit instructor participation.
- Instructor participation should complement and expand on ideas generated by the students.



## Tone of Voice Should be Conversational

- Avoid sounding lofty and academic.
- Avoid colloquialisms.
- Don't overuse acronyms.
- Use complete sentences that are well structured.
- Use some humor.



## Don't Say Too Much

- Communications should not exceed 1 - 2 screens.
- Readers lose interest and focus.
- Students will feel burdened to match a long message.



## Be Sensitive

- Different communication styles exist.
- Varied cultural backgrounds - humor may depend on culture.



# Diversify Activities

- Intersperse content presentations with discussions and student-centered exercises.



## Initial Activities

- Send a short biography of yourself. Require students to do the same.
- Produces a sense of community. Allows students to find common links.



## Small Groups Working Online

- Test preparation.
- Administrative issues.
- General advice and help.



## Small Groups Working Online

- Critique other's written work such as term papers.



# Small Groups Working Online

- Develop a team presentation on a specific topic.



## Small Groups Working Online

- Collaborate to produce a group answer to an open-ended discussion question.



# Small Groups Working Online

- Develop an analysis of a case study.



# Small Groups Working Online

- Write a joint research paper.



## Instructor or Guest Lecturer Activities

- Asks questions.
- Review student answers or comments.
- Makes summary comments.



# Interview an Expert

- Students interview experts or professionals in a related field and present a summary to the class for discussion.



# Panels

- Guest panelists provide material, engage in discussion among themselves, then open discussion to students.



# Debates

- Students post a position on a topic to which others respond followed by a critique of the positions.



## Discussion Questions

- Pre-class study questions and advance organizers.
- Assign specific discussion questions to individual students with discussion of responses by all.
- Recycle important discussion questions throughout the course.



## Problem Solving/Case Study

- A problem to be solved jointly may stimulate discussion for the math and sciences.
- A case study simulates real world situations.



# Brainstorming Sessions

- Generate ideas, create a list or structure them by relationships. Reach a consensus on best choices.
- An excellent pre-writing exercise.



## Weekly Summaries

- Most important points covered that week.
- Reinforces and synthesizes.
- Personalizes the material.
- Provides many perspectives.
- Helps instructor know what was effective.



## Weekly Article Critiques

- Allows student to focus on article of interest and control learning.
- Brings outside resources into the course.
- Provides students with extensive list of summaries of related resources.



# Office Hours

- Summarize an office hour visit for all students to utilize.



## What Is the Medium for Discussion?

- Asynchronous bulletin board software.
- Asynchronous - not at the same time.
- Threaded discussions so that messages related to a topic are displayed together.



## How Can Synchronous Chat Be Used to Promote Discussion?

- Hold virtual office hours.  
Announce to students that you will be available “live” during certain hours.



## How Can Synchronous Chat Be Used to Promote Discussion?

- Split larger classes into groups and chat only with one group at a time.



## How Can Synchronous Chat Be Used to Promote Discussion?

- Set the topic for the chat in advance so that the conversation doesn't wander.



## How Can Synchronous Chat Be Used to Promote Discussion?

- Set a specific duration for the chat session in advance. After 30 minutes or so, chatting becomes tiring.



## Communicate How Students Will Be Graded

- On the first day of the virtual class. This provides support and a degree of comfort.



## Arrange Telephone Office Hours

- If you detect students are having difficulty online, try a phone call.



## Be Prepared For Technology Failures

- Have available email, fax communication, telephone or any other means.



## Students Who Don't Participate

- Take note of students who don't participate during the first session and contact them privately. They may have technology problems.



## Returning Assignments

- Return graded assignments to students private conferences or mailboxes within 48 hours.
- Provide substantive critique, comment, and/or evaluation for work submitted, including sources of additional information.



## Provide Grades

- Provide private, weekly updates to EACH student on their grade status.
- Or use an online gradebook so that students can see current grades at any time.



## Respond to Quality Communications

- Thank students publicly for comments that show insight or depth. This will serve to model the types of responses you expect from other students as well as give positive reinforcement.



## Make Your Presence Felt

- Appear in the virtual classroom no fewer than five times a week.



# Make Quality Comments

- Make comments that go beyond simple questions or agreement.
- Model the types of responses you want your students to make.
- Make interpretive as well as descriptive comments.



## Don't Over Comment

- Don't comment on every student posting.
- Let the conversation develop.
- Give the students a chance to participate.