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Effective and Interactive Group Assignments in an Online Course

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Effective and Interactive Group Assignments in an Online Course

Two years ago I [Teresa] redesigned my Theatre History course from a face to face format to an online class. While the content and assessments translated well to the online environment, I had trouble replicating the kind of interactive group work that I had done in the face to face course. Not surprisingly, the one comment I repeatedly got from students was that they wished the course allowed them more opportunities to interact with each other.

To address this issue, I partnered with our Instructional Designer over mobile technology to find ways to leverage technology to support more collaborative online group projects. The solution we landed on was to use our university's Google suite to provide an online, collaborative space in which the students could work, and then bring their final work back to our LMS.

Based on that approach, I re-designed the course to include 5 group assignments. These assignments occur every two to three weeks. While each assignment is different, in that we are studying different periods of theatre history, they all follow this basic framework:

1. I randomly create groups of 3 students (each time the groups are different).
2. I create a Google folder for each group and make it available for all the students in the group to view and edit.

3. I assign a problem for the group to solve (using what they learned from that week's reading and additional research), and create a Google Doc, with a prompt, for each group to write their answer to the problem.

4. Each student within the group is expected to do research that will support their collective answer. Research assets are shared in the group folder where all members can review and analyze the results.

5. After a collaborative commenting process, students create one final answer. Each group submits their answer to the problem using our LMS discussion board, and each student then must read and respond to two different groups' posts.

For example, in the third week of the course, in which we studied the theatre of Ancient Greece, the students read two plays, *Lysistrata* and *Oedipus Rex*. Each student was responsible for finding a review of a production of each play, looking for reasons the producing company chose that play to perform. Then, as a group, they considered and answered the following question:

Your group will imagine that you are members of a theatre company that are charged with deciding which play your company will perform next. You must choose which of these two plays you should produce, and then write a statement to your theatre company about the reasons for your choice. Your statement should include one reason based on the research done by your group of other productions of the play, and one reason based on what we learned about why this play was originally performed (from our historical reading during this module).

By using a Google Doc for their collaborative work, my online students can asynchronously post their research and comment on others' work in their own time. Comments stay live within the document, updating regularly, and are automatically shared with members of the group. In this way, the student group can polish their answer collaboratively before submitting the final version to our LMS discussion board.

In addition to creating the collaborative space for students, the Google folders also have additional benefits, including:

- Having students work in a Google Doc allows me to track interactions on their written work, to see who participated in the discussions/editing, and to review what changes they made to their work along the way.
- The shared folder for each group makes it easy for me to grade the assignment, as all pieces are in one place.
- The folders also help me to easily collect artifacts of students' work for overall assessment of student performance in our department.
- Google folders grant students continued access, allowing them to more easily use materials from the course for future portfolios.

Not only were there benefits for me as the instructor in creating these group assignments, but the students found them useful as well. When asked to reflect on which assignments during the semester most helped them achieve one of our Course Learning Outcomes, multiple students referenced the group projects as work that helped them learn in the course. One student wrote, “The group [projects] were helpful in [achieving the Learning Outcome of ‘form and defend your own aesthetic judgments orally and in writing’] because I could get feedback on a particular costume or set design and then defend my ideas... I would often get feedback from classmates that really opened my perspective” (I. Berenson, Unit IV exam, 2017).

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The Promise and Challenge of Synchronous Online Cooperative Learning

The current standard paradigm for online learning involves asynchronous learning. We propose to expand that paradigm to include synchronous elements to the general course design, specifically cooperative learning (CL). Cooperative learning in any classroom, traditional or online, must include a synchronous event: all members are present at the same time in the same space. A synchronous form of online CL simulates face-to-face interaction available in a live classroom but conducted through screen-to-screen communication. The inclusion of synchronous components carries the benefit of increased student engagement and community-building, thereby maximizing the potential for student learning and successful completion.

The rationale for synchronous online CL is based on the powerful body of classroom CL research results summarized in Davidson, Major, and Michaelsen (2014). These include academic achievement, higher order thinking skills, interpersonal skills, intergroup relations, and more. We predict that the benefits of CL will transfer from the synchronous classroom environment to the synchronous online environment, but not necessarily to an asynchronous online environment.

Proposed synchronous course components would include meetings of all students enrolled in the course with the instructor. The compatibility of time zones in which