

Strategies for Online Collaborative Learning

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Logistics & Formats

Dyads – self-paired or assigned

Groups – maximum of three or four participants

Jigsaws – groups become experts on different topics and then regroup so that the new groups contain an expert from each original group who can then share knowledge with the other participants

Virtual Icebreakers

Snowball Effect

Each participant creates a new post as a personal introduction. The post includes at minimum the participant's name, professional background, and at least one or two random, interesting things. A picture (or avatar) is also recommended in order to allow participants to put a face with a name. Once everyone has had a chance to post their introduction, each participant is to find at least three other individuals with whom he or she has something in common, and respond to their posts. This activity requires at least three iterations in order to be most effective. It is called a "Snowball Effect" because the discussion grows as everyone responds to multiple people.

Class Flag

The instructor creates a blank slide presentation in Google Docs and adjusts sharing options to give all participants access to edit the presentation. Each participant locates various graphics that reflect his or her skills, background, and personality and places those graphics in the presentation. The whole class can contribute to a single slide, or each participant can create his or her own individual slide within one class presentation.

Writing

Collaborative Writing

In its simplest approach, this involves dyads working together to write an essay or synthesis paper. Assessment takes several forms, including a blend of peer and instructor evaluation. Requiring writing to be submitted at several stages serves as an accountability piece.

Writing Cycles

Collaboration can be used to improve writing and achieve a deeper level of thought. This requires some logistics and facilitation from the instructor. Once groups are formed, brainstorming and outlining might begin in a threaded discussion forum and then move after a specified timeframe to a web-based collaborative document platform such as Google Docs, where participants can work together both synchronously and asynchronously in a highly interactive environment. It is perfectly acceptable for the final version of a paper to come from the group effort, but it is also sometimes appropriate for the group process to end at a certain stage so that the final draft can come from each individual. Even with the latter approach, there is much to be gained from the collaborative stages, or cycles, of this type of writing activity.

Peer Review/Editing

The instructor can specify a specific timeline for writing an independent paper and include a requirement near the end that participants exchange papers for feedback prior to submitting for a grade. This peer feedback can be as simple as completing a grading rubric and including comments, or it can involve editing and markup. Microsoft Word and Google Docs are two options for facilitating peer editing.

(over)

Discussions

Role Playing

The instructor presents a scenario and asks participants to assume the role or perspective of a stakeholder who would be involved in such a situation. Participants provide rationale and/or evidence to support their assertions.

Simulation

Participants work in groups of 3-4 and apply relevant skills in order to solve a problem that is often closely connected to the real world. Simulations may sometimes involve the use of a workflow or decision tree.

Case Studies

Discussion activities involving case studies should include clear steps or stages for the discussion to follow and usually require a slightly longer timeframe than other discussion formats. In addition to analyzing existing case studies, groups can be challenged with creating original case studies that are then shared and analyzed by another group.

Debates

Debates can be facilitated as a full class or in small groups. If small groups are used, then an additional stage in the discussion can be added where each group comes to a consensus and a leader serves as a delegate to the full class where each group's view is posted in an open forum.

Structured Discussions

Three or more discussion prompts are provided within a single discussion cycle. Participants are required to post an initial, substantive response to one (or two) of the prompts and then follow up mid-cycle with at least three responses to other students' posts. This type of activity gives students a choice in their learning by allowing them to select the topics that are most interesting to them from those provided.

Collaborative Inquiry Projects

Expert Interviews

Participants work in groups within a threaded discussion board and/or a collaborative document platform to develop a list of questions to use for interviewing an expert in the field. This collaborative effort ensures that the most pertinent information is gleaned from interviewees. The use of small groups provides for multiple sets of questions and diverse results across a class as opposed to using the same question list for an entire class.

Wiki

A wiki is a collaborative web space where multiple users can easily contribute all types of information—text, graphics, animations, video, audio, and other embedded media—in an easy-to-use interface. The workspace bears some resemblance to common word processing applications, and no coding is required. A course wiki might be created with individual pages for each topic, or an entire wiki might be devoted to a single topic with individual pages contributed by participants. An example of a wiki site is one that contains a growing collection of case studies and artifacts on major incidents of intellectual property rights violations. Google Sites and Wikispaces are two platforms.

Multimedia

Video and audio projects capitalize on higher-order thinking skills and leverage the upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. Creating multimedia objects such as documentaries, digital stories, tutorials, and other products is a way to incorporate opportunities for participants to develop materials that can be used immediately in their professions. Web-based platforms such as WeVideo.com are designed to allow multiple users who are geographically separated to collaborate on video and audio projects in a user-friendly interface.