ONLINE CL@SSROOM

IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

Promoting Meaningful Engagement

By Stephan Perun

Live sessions in an online course create dynamic exchanges that lower students' anxiety about their learning by connecting them with their professor, classmates, and institution. They also enrich students' learning by giving them the space to think through ideas and encouraging them to reflect critically upon the course content and the perspectives of others.

Live sessions also present challenges. The lack of physical presence makes it easy for students to multitask by doing something else during these sessions. And, students don't want to be wrong, ask a "stupid" question, or otherwise embarrass themselves. Consequently, for students, the stakes are high: risk embarrassment to earn a good grade.

The challenge is to provide an experience that will engage students and meaningfully share information within the limits of the technology. John Immerwahr's (1994) framework of four Socratic questions—free fire, toss-up, inviter, and hot seat— is highly effective in meeting the challenge. The question types range from low to high stakes and can be used in combination to first get students participating and then move them to engaging in higher-level critical thinking.

Free Fire

The lowest stakes question type is the free fire. It is a prompt that any student can answer, as there are many answers, or any honest answer is acceptable. The instructor might ask students for their reaction to an author's argument or a provocative statement by the instructor. This ultra-low-risk dynamic is a great ice breaker to get students active in a class discussion. But this question type does not necessarily require preparation or critical thinking, and thus is more likely to promote quantity, not quality.

Toss-up

A slightly higher stakes variation is the toss-up, a question to which there is a right answer, but anyone can respond (making it a good chat board or poll question). For example, the professor might ask, "What was the author's thesis statement?" This question type can also be a good discussion starter. The added advantage is everyone pauses on a key idea from an assigned reading or other source.

Compared to the free fire, the

A Solution to the Free Rider Problem in Group Activities

By John Orlando

Group activities are an excellent way to improve student learning in an online course. But they invariably raise the free-rider problem—the student who does not contribute his or her fair share of the effort. This is particularly bothersome to students when there is one group grade for all members of a group. While there is a real-world value to giving a group grade since many activities in life are evaluated on a team basis, there is an issue of fairness in the students' minds. This leaves the faculty member with the unenviable choice of using a group grade and having to deal with student complaints about free riders, or using an individual grade and being unable to accurately distinguish one student's contribution from another. Kadriye O. Lewis, professor of Pediatrics at the UKMC School of Medicine, came up with a solution by creating an "Intra-Group Member Peer and Self-Evaluation" to assess individual performance.

Dr. Lewis uses a variety of small group activities in her classes that involve one or two weeks of work each, with the

Which Assessment Strategies Do Students Prefer?

By John Orlando

While most faculty stick with the tried-and-true quiz and paper assessment strategies for their online courses, the wide range of technologies available today offers a variety of assessment options beyond the traditional forms. But what do students think of these different forms?

Scott Bailey, Stacy Hendricks, and Stephanie Applewhite of Stephen F. Austin State University experimented with different assessment strategies in two online

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> **An engaging assessment is often a result of engaging content.**

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courses in educational leadership, and surveyed students afterward on their impressions of each one. The students were asked to score the strategies using three criteria: 1) enjoyment, 2) engagement with the material, and 3) transferability of knowledge gained to practice. The resulting votes allowed investigators to rank the various strategies from least to most preferred by students.

Interestingly, scores for the three criteria were remarkably consistent within each strategy. Students who found an activity highly enjoyable normally found it engaging and with a high degree of transferability of knowledge and visa versa. Moreover, traditional forms of assessment tended to score near the bottom.

The rankings provide a guide for any faculty member looking to develop engaging online content. Below are the different strategies grouped from lowest to highest in preference.

Lowest

1. **Quizzes** were by far the lowest-ranked assessments on the list. Very few students found the information transferable to other environments.

2. **Traditional papers** between two and eight pages long scored higher than quizzes, but were still near the bottom of the list.

3. **Group projects** were also ranked low on the list. Students were asked to collaborate on a series of tasks and submit a written paper on the outcome of their efforts. While faculty assign these to teach collaboration skills, students often see them as creating additional coordination work and the free rider problem.

Middle

1. **Audio recordings** fell into a middle category. Students created recordings of themselves explaining course concepts as they would to parents, faculty, or other groups. While some students were initially hesitant about the technology, they quickly picked up the systems and generally enjoyed the activity.

2. **Open discussion** involved students posting to the traditional course discussion forum on their LMS. Students generally valued open discussion, but it is important to structure it in a way that provides interesting and thought-provoking questions.

3. **Paired discussion** was a variation on the traditional discussion

Creating Accessible Video for the Online Classroom

By Krista Greear and Patrick R. Lowenthal

Videos are being integrated more and more into the online classroom. However, they can create barriers for learners with hearing problems. If a student asks for an ADA accommodation for a video, you will be scrambling at the last minute to create a text supplement. That's why it's good practice to create a text supplement at the same time that you create a video.

Many faculty use separate transcripts to add text for hearing-impaired students. But this makes it challenging for a deaf or hard-of-hearing student to absorb the visual and auditory information simultaneously, as they need to shift back and forth between the images and text. The better way to create accessible video is with captions that appear within the video itself, allowing learners to read the text with the images. While captioning takes time, the steps are not difficult to master, and there are a variety of options for adding captions to online videos.

A common way to caption videos is to do it yourself, either in two steps, creating the transcript and then adding it to the video, or in one step with software that creates the captions automatically from the video. While the former process sounds more time-consuming, automated systems often make a lot of mistakes and require editing the results later on. This is why some people prefer making the transcript manually. Below is a description of each process.

Two-step process

Step one: Create the transcript
- **Manual creation:** Type a script before you create the video and then read from it when recording your video narration. This option can work well, but it can be very challenging for faculty using video in a less scripted manner (e.g., instructional screencasts of software).
- **Desktop software:** Speak into speech-to-text software like Dragon Naturally Speaking for PC to translate your words into written text. The quality has come a long way from the early days of speech recognition, but the results will still need to be edited for errors.

Step two: Sync the transcript to video
- **Web-based software:** Upload your video to YouTube and then upload the transcript file afterwards. The

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**The better way
to create
accessible video
is with captions.**

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system will read the transcript and sync the two by determining when the text needs to appear on the screen.
- **Commercial provider:** You can pay a commercial provider a fee to take your video and transcript and sync the two. These providers use human or computer efforts to ensure the captions show at the appropriate time.

One-step process

Another option is to use software that creates captions right off the audio in the video, thus avoiding the two-step process outlined above. However, the features, methodology, and capabilities of each software program vary widely.
- **Web-based software:** YouTube is a popular video application that has built-in speech recognition to create automated captions. Again, the results will need to be edited for accuracy.
- **Desktop software:** Some lecture-capture or presentation-creation software have a built-in captioning feature. Captivate allows you to (a) create a presentation, create a transcript separately, and then sync the words with the video to create captions or (b) create a presentation, export audio, submit audio to a vendor for captioning with speech-to-text software to have the computer create a transcript, then sync the words with the video to create captions. Camtasia Studio is another popular option. You can add captions manually with Camtasia Studio or use its speech-to-text tool to create the transcript. (Please note the captioning feature is currently available only for the PC version; the Mac version of Camtasia does not have this capability.) In our experience, some faculty find using Camtasia Studio easier than others do.

Pay for it: Commercial providers

Given the time it takes to create captions yourself, many colleges and universities use commercial providers to caption online-course videos. Commercial providers can (a) create or edit a transcript only, (b) sync or merge the transcript to a video, or (c) create an interactive transcript that is searchable by word. Some providers can also translate videos and even add captions to videos that you didn't create and do not own. Rev.com is a popular option. Receive captions in 24–48 hours for as little as $1 a minute.

in which students posted messages on course room boards in groups of two to five. The ratings for these group discussions were similar to those for course wide discussions.

Highest

1. **Response to video** was at the top of the list. Here students watched a video documentary and responded with a written analysis. Students found the video documentary inspiring and moving. They connected with it on a more emotional level than they would a reading, as it provided a real-world connection to the material. An instructor can find a wide range of excellent documentaries to include in courses from sites such as Free Documentaries TV.

2. **Twitter summaries** came in as the second most preferred form of assessment. Students were required to summarize in a tweet each of the chapters that they read. By being limited to 140 characters or fewer, the exercise helped students distill main points down to central themes, which is important for synthesizing points in the material.

3. **Screencasts** were the next most highly ranked types of assessments. The students created mock presentations that they would give as new administrators to the faculty of a school. The screencasts included both the presentation material and a corner webcam video of the students themselves delivering the narration. Free systems such as Screencast-o-matic are ideal for creating screencasts that combine computer display with webcam videos. The basic format can be applied to a variety of subjects

and assignments, such as students in a history course doing a mock presentation to a local historical society on a famous event.

4. **Field experiences** involved students taking part in an experience related to the course content. This serves as a reminder that even online students can be given assignments that require some sort of fieldwork. It might be to catalog fauna in a local park for a biology class, or to report on local bridge structures for a civil engineering course.

5. **Interviews** of local school administrators were also popular. Students interviewed two administrators and created a reflection on what they learned about the positions. Once again, these interviews connected the course material with practice.

6. **Work samples** provided students with an opportunity to take a given data set or scenario and produce a document similar to one they would create as practitioners in their field. These could be professional development plans for their faculty, campus needs assessments, etc. These provided an opportunity for students to apply what they learn to a professional situation.

Themes

The student preferences suggest a few principles that can guide an instructor in choosing assessments for an online course. For one, the mere fact that students were given something beyond the same old papers and quizzes created engagement. Novelty itself can be a reason for choosing an assessment activity. Two, assignments that allow students to apply their knowledge to real or hypothetical scenarios are preferred over academic exercises that just ask students to repeat

what they know. These application activities are often called "authentic" assessments, as they mimic how the student will be using their knowledge in the future. Three, an engaging assessment is often a result of engaging content. Even good old-fashioned written assignments were viewed favorably when they were based on an engaging video.

Use these results to choose engaging assessments for your online courses.

Reference

Bailey, S., Hendricks, S., Applewhite, S. (2015). Student Perspectives of Assessment Strategies in Online Courses, *Journal of Interactive Online Learning,* v.13, n. 3, 112-25. @

Next Month's Topics

The Use of Rubrics in
Online Education

How Do Keep From Going MIA
in your Online Course

Commons Mistakes to Avoid
in Online Teaching

What Research Tells Us
about Online Discussion

Using VoiceThread to Support
Close Reading From a Distance

Cultivating Relationships Online

Padlet for Online Courses

By John Orlando

Online faculty generally default to their learning management system's discussion form to facilitate student collaboration or sharing. But Padlet provides an alternate format that can be much better for many purposes. The LMS forum is designed for linear, text-based discussions around a pre-established theme. This is good if a faculty member wants to corral discussion and keep it on track, but it is not so good for facilitating a more free-form, creative discussion that branches out into many areas. Padlet also provides a much more visually appealing, and thus inviting, system for facilitating content sharing among students.

Padlet is a kind of online sticky board. It is similar to a wiki in that it allows for collaborative postings. But unlike many wikis, content can be dropped anywhere on the board, as you would a sticky note. This takes the user out of the linear mind-set of responding to the last posting on a discussion thread and instead encourages postings about any content on the board. Plus, Padlet is much friendlier to visual content such as images and video. Here are some ideas for using it in your online classes.

Resource repository. A Padlet wall can be set up for students to post supplemental resources on topics covered in class. Students in a political science course can post current event stories from magazines or other media. If the topic is more conceptual, such as educational theory, students can add images or other content that illustrate the topic in practice.

Commentary. Padlet allows instructors to integrate content and discussion within the same space. Students can post information on a topic and comment on it right where it appears. Students can also add questions about class topics that occur to them while they are doing pre-class readings. These questions can be ideal discussion starters in a flipped classroom. The instructor would draw up the page of questions in front of the class and ask the students to answer them. An instructor might want to allow anonymous postings so that students feel more comfortable submitting questions. In this way the instructor gets more questions than he or she would get by asking

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Padlet allows instructors to integrate content and discussion on the same page.

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students to call out their questions in class.

Padlet can also be used as a response system in a flipped classroom. The instructor can throw out questions or problems for the students to answer on the board, and students can also respond to each other's postings in real time.

The board can also host post-class questions on content. Very often thoughts occur to students after the material has been covered in class. If a flipped classroom is using Padlet to host course content, then students can post messages about what they find meaningful, or still puzzling, after class.

Portfolios. Padlet's visual design makes it ideal for posting student portfolios. While a visual course such as photography or design best fits the system, students in other subjects can post visual portfolios that represent their research as well. For instance, a student researching Aristotle's ethics for a philosophy course can post images with commentary that represent Aristotle's views in practice.

Student blogs. The topic-centered design of the LMS discussion makes it less likely that students will put themselves into their postings. A blog is owner-centered and thus tends to express more of the personality of the owner. Students can each create a Padlet wall and use it to post their thoughts on course topics, including articles, images, or other resources to illustrate how the topics resonate with them. This allows the instructor to see how a topic affects different students. The instructor might learn that a medical ethics case is viewed from the perspective of the doctor's duties by some students, and from the perspective of the patient's feelings by others.

Group projects. Group projects can raise a bit of a conundrum for online faculty, as many learning management systems are fundamentally designed to host individual student work. Padlet provides a good mechanism for both developing and publicizing group work. A wall can be set up for each group in the class, and students given access to post to it. Not only does this make it easy for students to gather and post content, but they also can choose a design for their wall that illustrates the central theme they want to convey to the viewer. The added design elements help draw together the individual content and help the group think about the wider message in their work.

Take a look at this short tutorial from Richard Byrne on how to quickly create a Padlet wall, and consider ways that it can enhance student collaboration in your courses (*http://bit.ly/1LYGrh0*). @

results posted to a discussion board area for class deliberation. Groups are scrambled every few weeks in order to give students a chance to work with others. At the end of each group activity, all group members fill out an evaluation on every other group member's participation. Each student answers a variety of questions about the other students on a traditional Likert scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The topics include:

- Keeping abreast of group progress
- Sharing ideas
- Completing tasks on time
- Attending meetings
- Demonstrating respect for others
- Contributing to group discussions

There are also open-ended questions on how the group worked in general. Students are asked to comment on whether the group functioned well, and offer suggestions on how to improve group functioning in the future.

Not only do these evaluations identify free riders, but the fact that students know they will be evaluated helps reduce the free-rider problem to begin with. Plus, the exercise helps students think about the qualities that make for good group dynamics. Some students might not think about how their attitude affects the functioning of a group until asked to reflect on what they saw from others.

Besides the peer evaluation, students also fill out an evaluation of their own performance. This self-evaluation asks students to rate the degree to which they satisfied criteria such as:

- Completing the readings before posting to a discussion board
- Sharing ideas with other group members
- Demonstrating a positive attitude toward others

Students do not see the results of the evaluations, but the teacher provides appropriate feedback as a wake-up call, which can be a powerful learning experience.

Dr. Lewis offers these suggestions for using group evaluations in online classes:

- Provide students with detailed information on how to assess one another in the evaluations.

If possible, provide a sample to demonstrate the assessment process.
- Provide students with individual feedback based on the evaluations of their performance by others. Also include the teacher's evaluation of the student.
- Provide results to students as soon as the first evaluations come in so that they can improve their performance as the course goes on. Constant feedback will also allow students to see how differences in their behaviors are being interpreted by other students.

Take a look at the questions in the intra-group evaluation form at *http://bit.ly/1YMXjjK* and the questions in the self-evaluation form at *http://bit.ly/1FBrd49* to get ideas on how you can use similar evaluations to improve student learning and group performance in your classes.

Reference

Lewis, K. (2006). *Evaluation of Online Group Activities: Intra-Group Member Peer Evaluation,* 22nd Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning, Madison, Wis. @

Pay for it: Freelancers

One last option is to pay a freelancer to create a transcript for you. Fiverr.com lists dozens of freelancers who will caption 15 minutes of video for $5 (often more for multiple speakers or quick turnaround). If you have flexibility, freelancers might be the cheapest way to get a transcript created, and therefore, extremely useful if you are paying for these services out of your own pocket.

Additional resources

Still looking for more support? Check out these two websites:
- **University of Washington: Caption your own video for free**
  http://www.washington.edu/ accessibility/videos/free-captioning/

This website covers topics including captioning your own video for free, how to add caption files to video, adding captions to YouTube videos, and adding captions to videos on web pages.

- **DCMP: Caption it yourself**
  https://www.dcmp.org/ciy/

This website includes sections on: Web-Based Captioning/Subtitling Tools, Desktop Captioning/ Subtitling Software, Caption-Ready Video Hosting Providers, How to Caption It Yourself, and Guidelines for Captions.

Video captioning is not difficult, and is a critical component for creating an accessible online course.

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toss-up saves time by getting to the topic at hand quickly, and holds students more accountable for preparation. Given the higher stakes, there is a risk of no response (after all, students do not like to be wrong). If the professor asks a toss-up and gets silence, then he or she can ask a more general free-fire question to uncover the idea. Neither the free fire nor the toss-up promote critical thinking; that can best be achieved with higher-stakes questions.

Inviter

After building participation, the professor can then shape a higher-level discussion with the inviter or hot seat. The inviter is a question to which there are many answers. For example, the professor might select a student who answered a toss-up correctly and invite him or her to explain "why" or "how."

This question type can force students to think more deeply about the course content. It is also interesting to students, and provides teachable moments. The professor might also use an inviter if he or she knows that a particular student has a good response. The professor might ask the student to elaborate upon a discussion board post or perhaps highlight salient points of a prior email exchange.

The inviter also brings risks. Inviting one student to respond to a follow-up question in front of the whole class puts that student on the spot. Inviting any student to respond to a question may result in a student simply talking about something with which he or she is comfortable and struggle to make connections to the ideas under study. This sets the stage for one student to monopolize the discussion, which can waste valuable time and/or require the professor to interrupt and refocus the student. In both cases, the inviter can create a confrontational feel that might inadvertently promote hiding or diminish students' engagement in other areas of the course (e.g., discussion boards, emails, etc.).

The key to using the inviter productively is to give students an out by responding positively to whatever they say, especially if you interrupt them. In this way the professor lowers the stakes of an otherwise high-stakes question, which mitigates the confrontational feel and encourages other students to take the risk of participating.

Hot Seat

While lowering the stakes for students can equate to increased participation, consistently doing so can create a dynamic whereby students do not feel the need to prepare. The highest-stakes question type—the hot seat—is needed as a follow-up (or a lead) to make the students uncomfortable enough to prepare, focus, and think critically. The professor asks one student a question to which there is only one right (or approximate) answer. The student must then think critically about the course content and how to use it to respond to the question. The professor will quickly identify to what extent a student has prepared and/or is paying attention, and other students will learn that everyone is accountable for preparation and substantive participation.

Asking a student to respond on the spot is confrontational. The whole class will hear the student's understanding of the material and thinking process; the stakes are high to save face. To manage this risk of diminishing participation, let students off the hook if they are wrong. Affirm a student's efforts with a statement like "You're almost there," and then change the question type to a toss-up by asking the class "Who can help answer the question?"

Promoting meaningful engagement in the live virtual classroom is a matter of lowering the awkwardness and raising the stakes.

References

Immerwahr, J. (1994). The Socratic classroom: Classroom communication strategies. *Journal of Management Systems, 6*(1), 37-44.

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	Question Type	Strength/Utility	Deficiency/Caution
R **I** **S** **K** ↑	Hot Seat • one student • one answer	Accountability Promotes preparation Promotes critical thinking	Confrontational Embarrassing
	Inviter • one student • many answers	Promotes critical thinking Creates teachable moments Elaboration of a "good" point	Lengthy elaboration/off topic Hot seat feels confrontational
	Toss Up • any student • one answer	Focus the class Low risk/icebreaker Promotes preparation	Silence Only one student contributes Repetition
	Free Fire • any student • many answers	Many students participating Low risk/icebreaker Discussion starting point	Time consuming Can diminish thinking Promotes quantity

In Praise of Failure

By John Orlando

One of the biggest failures of higher education is punishing student failure. A bad performance on an assignment is preserved and carried all the way to the final grade. This makes students adverse to risk and obsessed with grades.

But failure is one of our most powerful teaching tools. Many, if not most, of the really important things we learn in life come through failure. I install a kitchen faucet the wrong way, it fails, and from this experience I learn to install it the right way. Learning from failure hardened the lesson in my mind much better than it would have been had I just been told the right way to begin with. As educators, we should be embracing, if not encouraging, student failure as a teaching device.

Coaches understand this principle. NFL coaches will tell rookies not to be afraid of making mistakes in practice because that is the only way they will learn. The worst thing they can do is nothing. Wade Phillips went one step further when he told his team before a preseason game that "your mistakes are my fault; your lack of effort is your fault." Think of the educational view that this comment embodies.

The founders of Google understood the principle. Once during the early years, the Google marketing manager reluctantly informed one of the founders that she had made a mistake that cost the company a million dollars. His response? He told her that he was glad that she made the mistake because it showed that she was taking risks, and the company would never grow without people taking risks. The results speak for themselves. Google is famous for its experimentation, but that experimentation is not possible unless employees know that failure is OK.

Games are powerful learning devices because they allow for low-cost failure. Go through the wrong door and you will get killed and then respawn to try a different door. Failure is not to be feared; it is treated as a learning experience.

We can incorporate failure as a teaching device with assessments that reward final achievement rather than punish mistakes along the way. I worked with a professor who gave everyone in his course an "A" because students were required to revise and resubmit their assignments until they reached "A" work, and then he accepted it. Instead of becoming discouraged by their failures, students knew that they could achieve high grades if they were willing to work and learn from their mistakes.

The online environment is ideal for setting up assessments that reward final achievement. An instructor can have students do multiple-choice quizzes after each reading and allow for resubmissions until the student gets all the questions correct. The instructor can watch the number of submissions to prevent guessing.

We can also use peer assessments to catch student errors before they are submitted. Students can be put into pairs, or small groups, and post their writing assignments to one another to check for clarity, grammar, etc. David Wiley at Brigham Young University had his students post their written work to a blog before handing it in. The students received comments from other students and even faculty at other institutions, which improved their work tremendously. Wiley found that dozens of other people were effectively doing his job for him by providing students with commentary. It multiplied student outcomes without any extra effort on his part. (*http://bit.ly/1MCGrma*)

The University of Maryland Baltimore County found that when they switched chemistry labs from individual students doing experiments and submitting their results, to groups of students posting their findings to a blog and receiving feedback from other students, the average passing rate in class went from 71.2 percent to 85.6 percent, even as the minimum score needed to pass went up. (*https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/10/02/chemistry*) Here again students were given the opportunity to identify their errors and correct them before they became a part of the grade.

We can also reduce the fear of public failure. Many faculty in the flipped classroom use class time to pepper students with questions that fish for a specific answer that the instructor has in mind. But this forces the student to guess at what the instructor is thinking, and possibly guess wrong in front of others. Most students decide to leave it to those few who always answer the instructor's questions. Besides, the answer will come out eventually anyway.

When looking for a specific answer, faculty are better off using in-class polling systems to gather responses anonymously. Students are not worried about guessing wrong, and everyone submits a guess, not just the one student called upon or who raises his or her hand. Having submitted a guess, they can see how others guessed and are interested in discovering whether they got it right. They are now invested in the answer and so are paying better attention to it, and getting it wrong is not a problem.

Consider ways to encourage failure in your courses. **@**