

**An Interactive Peer
Examination of Online
Teaching:
Experienced and Novice
Instructors Explore
Best Practices**

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Introduction & Methodology

Introduction

In 2001, the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium received a three-year grant from the Davis Educational Foundation to improve assessment methods and student services in online courses. Part of this grant allowed us to conduct research on teaching, learning, and serving online students. For the past two years we have used the technology involved in teaching and learning online to conduct the research studies. The first year, we used online focus groups as a means of understanding how students studied and learned online. In this second year, our research focused on teaching and assessing students online.

Methodology

The CTDLC-Davis Project involves eight public and private, two-, and four- year institutions combining expertise and resources to create what has developed into a highly collaborative project. Project Directors from each of the participating institutions agreed that they wanted to focus on teaching with a specific emphasis on how faculty in different disciplines approached online teaching. The following three research questions and sub-questions were agreed on:

- ? How do online faculty communicate outcomes to their students?
- ? How do they design the course for students to achieve these outcomes
 - o What types of learning activities do they provide?
 - o Is there a range of activities that respect different ways of learning?
 - o How do they assess these outcomes?

What sort of expectations do faculty communicate and how do they do so?

The research model called for eight experienced online instructors in different disciplines to be matched with eight experienced peer teachers in a similar discipline who had no online teaching experience. The peers would have total access to the instructor's class, including the discussion boards, and in some cases to student grades. The instructor and peer would use an asynchronous discussion thread in a course management system to communicate, sharing thoughts about the class and the issues related to the research. This thread was designed both for the convenience of asynchronous communication and because it allowed researchers access to a written record of the conversation of the pairs. Faculty were recruited by the institutional Project Directors and were paid an honorarium to participate. Each participant was required to submit a final report detailing what they learned in the process.

The Institutional Project Directors recruited and selected the participants using the above criteria. Eight pairs were formed with instructors from 8 different institutions – 4 community colleges, one public college, one public university, and 2 private universities (Appendix A). There were 5 different disciplines represented including Political Science, Psychology, Environmental Science, Business, Nursing, and Elementary Statistics. There were three Business courses including Managerial Communications, Studies in Entrepreneurship, and Gender Issues in Management. The Environmental Statistics pair dropped out of the project and one of the instructors did not hand in a final report. Throughout this report we will refer to the person teaching the course as the "Instructor," the person observing as the "Peer," and the word "faculty" to refer to both. Quotes are attributed to the person who wrote them, not necessarily to the instructor whose pedagogy or techniques may be referred to in the quote.

The researchers used data from both the written reports and from the archived threaded discussions for their analysis. A draft report was then submitted to the participating faculty for their review and comments. They were also asked whether they preferred being identified by name and institution or whether they preferred the use of an alias. One of the participants asked that he and his institution not be identified, and an alias has been used throughout the report.

It turned out that this research model had a variety of unanticipated problems that interfered with meeting the goals of the research project. However, there also were some very interesting results, some of which were the unintended consequences of the problems found in the research design. This report will focus initially on the methodology and then on the findings. The analysis comes from both the transcripts of the discussion forums as well as the final reports.

The methodological problems stemmed primarily from the decision to use novice online instructors as the peer observers. Some of the Project Directors felt strongly that non-online instructors should be involved in the project, stemming from a belief that experienced teachers who knew the discipline, but didn't know online learning would bring "fresh eyes" with which to observe the classes. This decision resulted in some specific barriers to the research, such as the Peers' unfamiliarity with the online environment, their lack of sophistication with online pedagogy, and in some cases a preconceived bias against online learning and teaching. These problems were compounded by the researcher not providing a sufficient orientation, both technical and methodological to the project. Each of problem areas these will be explored below.

The two partners were given instructions via email as to the scope and methodology of the project, and an online class was set up which included detailed instructions for the project and a discussion thread for each pair. Peers were given the URL, user name, and logon for the class they were observing. There was no online or face to face orientation to the technology, and this created serious problems. In most cases the Peers struggled with the technology, which gave them some insight into what novice students go through, but, at least initially, interfered with their ability to focus on the class. As one of the Peers correctly pointed out, "You all speak another language, one I'm not totally familiar with...It seems that the administrator of this study does make assumptions about how skilled the onground people are" (Clampet). Another Peer (Dupille) observed, "Things seemed unfamiliar and foreboding." One Peer made the useful suggestion that he would have appreciated an orientation "either live or virtual, during which I could have asked questions and had a general orientation" (Holmes). While for some Peers this was a short term barrier, others never seemed to really see the entire scope of the class. This slowed down the Peers' entry into the real substance of the class and also, in some cases, shifted their focus onto the technological issues involved in teaching online, rather than the pedagogical and assessment issues which were the core of the research. Several faculty regretted that a final meeting to discuss the project was not held.

Another initial problem was that the researcher had not ensured that textbooks would be available for all the Peers. This created delays and led to a focus on procuring books rather than the content, layout, and pedagogy of the class.

The largest impediment however, was that the level of the Instructors' knowledge and skill in online teaching was so far beyond that of most of the Peer partners, it resulted in a lack of parity in communication, limiting both the depth and scope of the pairs' interactions. For example, the Instructors' comments often went far beyond the questions asked by their Peers, "I'd like to periodically provide you with some of my philosophy and logic in my online teaching." (Dorsey). One provided her Peer with a paper she had written on online instructional design (Barker). The Peers appeared unable to question or probe further, because they were in fact novices and their knowledge base was limited. Much of their time and focus was spent on issues that most new online faculty have to deal with such as time management, technology, and grading instead of the areas on which the research was based.

Another methodological flaw was that the Peers saw only one online class. This was done purposefully, so they would have the time to observe one class in depth and the opportunity to communicate and connect with a seasoned online instructor about their learning and their observations. This would not have been a problem had they had experience with a number of different online classes. However, for most of them, that one class alone shaped much of their view of online teaching. If the course they were observing did not have a collaborative or group project then a comment like, “I cannot imagine how team projects could be done using an online format” (Capuano) was reasonable despite the fact that another Peer observed a very interesting collaborative project. This single focus on one class also served to bolster the opinions of those faculty who entered the project with clear reservations toward online teaching. Three Peers very clearly expressed their belief that online teaching and learning was not for them, but did so in terms that shed a negative light on online teaching as a whole, “My courses would not be easily taught on line because of my participative, collaborative teaching style” (Clampet). “I’m a very enthusiastic instructor and I just can’t see how I can translate that into a course” (Cavanaugh). The implication drawn from these comments is that the one course they observed was not able to help them see that online courses can be participatory, collaborative, or full of enthusiasm. This is not to say that every teacher should teach online or that every student should take an online course, but rather that seeing only one class and not a wide variety of online experiences gave the Peers a very narrow view of what is possible in online courses. On the other hand, two of the Peers used this opportunity to think about creating their own online courses.

The methodology also was designed to look at best practices by discipline. What was most striking in analyzing the conversations and the reports was that discipline seemed irrelevant. Best practices in online teaching crossed disciplinary boundaries, particularly, as will be evident later in the report, in the areas of assessment, discussions, and organization. Without referring to the chart of courses and instructors, it was nearly impossible when reading threaded discussions or the final reports, to know the discipline of the course being discussed. It is possible that this might not have been true had the math faculty stayed in the project, but it was certainly true of the rest. For example, while a comment such as, “online classes should be assignment-based” (Holmberg) rather than dependent on tests and quizzes for assessment, was made specifically about the science course, it was echoed in almost all of the other courses. One implication of this for future research of this type is that it may be more effective to have an experienced online faculty observe online classes, even if they aren’t in the same disciplines, rather than focus on the discipline background of the observer.

Lastly, it is important to note how generous faculty were with this project and with each other. Each participant spent an enormous amount of time observing, pondering, discussing, and writing about this experience. If the project did not lead exactly to specific answers of the research questions, that was, as outlined above, the fault of the design, not of the participants. There are, contained in this report, many interesting findings, and many of the participants felt they learned much from the project. Their generosity with each other also was evident throughout the project. In at least two cases we observed Peers asking if they could use, adapt, or borrow a technique, learning object, or idea of their Instructors (primarily to use in an onground class). Without hesitation they were always given permission immediately, “Why reinvent the wheel is my theory” (Vonniessen-Applebee).

Findings

Despite all of the problems in the methodology, both Peers and Instructors were able to pinpoint many of the practices which contributed to student learning in online classes and which helped faculty manage online teaching. These fell into the major categories which are usually part of any discussion of online best practices including assessment, interactions, course creation, and the role of faculty. Faculty were able to pinpoint some very specific suggestions which should be of help to both novice and experienced online instructors. Many of those suggestions are listed in the Best Practices Section at the end.

Course Creation

Most of the instructors were clear that many of the same issues that drive the creation of an onground class drive the creation of an online class. “In fall ’99 I attended a one day seminar put on by Ed Klonoski. To my surprise, we talked mostly about curriculum design (not about DL). That got me thinking about the way I deliver all my courses, not just DL.” (Benoit). He followed this up by saying, “The primary issue is course structure, how the material is organized. No technical skills are needed to address that...Create a syllabus the way you would for any class. Think about what topics you want to cover, how the students will learn those topics, and how they will demonstrate their learning.” Other Instructors noted specifically what they consider in preparing their courses: “...recognizing diverse learning styles of my students and how to address them” (Holmberg), and “make it interesting, ask provocative questions, maximize opportunities for students to engage in original thought, and keep the design simple.” (Capuano). And finally one noted that the software is really unimportant, “Once you understand the concepts of Distance Learning the course management software seems a non-issue (Holmes).”

Many instructors commented about the importance of the syllabus. A syllabus should be comprehensive and detailed (Michels) so that it answers most of the students questions before they can think of them thus decreasing confusion and emails. A course and syllabus which emphasize “simplicity and consistency” help students navigate through the course (Vonniessen-Applebee). A syllabus should tell students “what the aim of the course is and what they have to do to achieve the goals” (Vonniessen-Applebee). Many syllabi contain a detailed calendar which outlines what assignments are due when. While not all courses require due dates, some faculty believe they help students organize their time. (Valente)

Although the researcher had asked that Instructors comment specifically on course content, much less time was spent on this aspect of the online course. This may be because in some ways online course content does not differ significantly from onground content. Almost all faculty felt that a text book was important; for some it took the place of the course lecture. One instructor prepares a “learning packet” for each module which is not tied directly to the text so that if the text is changed the learning packet does not necessarily have to be revised (Bednarz). Another instructor has each module organized into 7 parts: a) module overview; b) performance objectives; c) Major content summary; d) Readings including web links; e) exercises (optional and not graded); f) study journal exercises; g) assignments; h) class discussion. (Barker). Several faculty included hyperlinks to information on the web, which can provide students with applications of key concepts and can heighten curiosity (Dupille, Valente). They can also be used to “individualize” the course so that students have choices of which links to follow depending on learning style and learning goals. However, several instructors cautioned that links need to be checked every semester (Valente). Where faculty did not comment extensively on content, more attention was given in their reports to assignments and assessment.

Assessment

While most course management systems and e-packs make it simple to create objective tests and quizzes, faculty tended to use them as aids to student learning but counted them as a very small percentage of the grade. The greater emphasis was on a variety of assignments and assessments which encourage students to use the concepts they have learned, reflect on their learning, be creative and connect their own experiences to the course material. Almost all of the instructors who require research papers construct their assignments in ways that they believe reduce or eliminate the possibility of plagiarism by requiring students to include original thought or connections to personal experiences in their writing. One Instructor goes further, requiring students to submit written assignments in stages, i.e. outline, first draft, etc., to prevent plagiarism. (Michels) Another interesting approach to effective assessment has students keeping a “study journal,” which requires them to reflect on what they are learning from the text book. The Instructor collects them twice a semester, which allows her great insight into what the students are or are not learning (Barker). She also believes it ensures they do the reading, which is not always true of her onground students. Here too, faculty believe that clarity is essential. Students should know what is expected, how work will be graded, and when it is due. Posting rubrics and examples are some of the ways faculty make certain students understand the course expectations. (Capuano)

Allowing students to choose their own assignments to meet course objectives also provides a way to meet different learning styles and objectives. For example, as one Peer noted, “...a verbal learner can do an off-line assignment (expert interview for example) and write a paper. A visual learner can read assignments and write a paper and an experiential based exercise can be crafted to support the learning by the individual as opposed to one-size fits all classroom approach” (Paulone). An online progress report which includes course objectives and assignments that students complete and turn into the instructor at the midterm and end of semester ensure that the students and faculty are clear on their progress (Bednarz). While many of the Instructors and Peers talked of exciting creative assessments, they differed only slightly if at all from what is done in onground courses. In contrast, interaction between students and Instructors appears to require different approaches and considerations between online and onground classes.

Interactions

The major difference between onground classes and these online classes was the use of the threaded discussion. One faculty stated that “the single most important role of the faculty in designing this discussion is to develop questions that promote student-to-student interaction and critical thinking.” (Barker) Her success in designing stimulating questions was evident to her Peer who pointed out that “...on average there were 60+ responses for every question posed,” but questioned whether this would be true in other types of courses with other types of students (these were working adults) (Holmes). Another Instructor agreed with this assessment pointing out that “...in online environments, more than in classroom formats, the success of the class is far more in the hands of the students than the professor” (Capuano). For this reason, another Instructor went on to say she believed it was essential to design the questions and assignments that used the threaded discussion when planning the course and immersed in the material, and that the instructors’ role should be not to respond to everyone, but to summarize, focus, apply to theory, and ask students to synthesize or analyze an argument. (Barker). Instructors had a wide variety of ways to use the threaded discussion area other than just “discussion” Some of them use them for debates (Capuano), to relate the course to current events (Capuano) or to other sources such as quotes or cartoons (Valente). The Instructors agreed that the written record of the “discussion” made it easier to grade an online discussion than one in a classroom. One Instructor described a very clear grading structure which took into account thoughtfulness and detail of response (Vonniessen-Applebee). The threaded discussion also served some additional purposes outside of assessment. Many instructors used an initial thread to encourage students to introduce themselves and to get to know each other. Some had an “ask the instructor” thread where students posted questions about the course. One asks students to use email only for personal issues (Vonniessen-Applebee). This instructor also had a “water-cooler” where students could discuss issues outside the purview of the class.

Two instructors use the threaded discussion conference format for group and collaborative projects. While some instructors express a reluctance to do this, another says quite forcefully, “I really do believe they can work on line. As an instructor you have to believe that they can work and have conviction, as students will complain about online group projects as much as they do about group projects in class” (Vonniessen-Applebee). She uses case studies and simulations for group projects. Another Instructor divides her class into groups to prepare questions for virtual guest lecturers who appear asynchronously in her class for a week answering the questions the groups have chosen (Bednarz). Both Instructors point out that by having students do their group work in the threaded conference, they can monitor the group and create a grading scheme which rewards both the group and individual efforts. This alleviates the reason many students don’t like groups—they are tied to, but can not control, the efforts of others.

One Instructor discussed at length his use of email. One is to provide feedback, which all online Instructors mentioned as an essential part of their role. He emails students individually several times during the first few assignments just to keep in contact. He emails the class weekly or biweekly. He also described using email as a way to deal with a very troublesome student. The privacy of the email allowed him to deal frankly with the student’s behavior without making him defensive or embarrassing him. (Capuano)

Instructors and Peers had a variety of views on synchronous and face-to-face interactions. Several provided or supported the idea of an initial face-to-face orientation to help new online students master the technology (Holmberg, Dorsey). At the same time, some Instructors noted that face-to-face activities are impractical for those who live far away from the institution (Bednarz). As more and more institutions use course management tools in their onground classes, it will be interesting to see whether this perceived need for an onground orientation continues to exist. However, as the methodology section points out, there must be some type of orientation to the technology and structure of online courses for those who have never used it. Two of the Instructors have voluntary virtual synchronous chats for their students (Bednarz, Valente). They believe it helps students connect to each other and to the Instructor. Others caution that students come to online learning for the flexibility and the asynchronicity it provides and often do not want to, or can not participate in chats (Vonniessen-Applebee). Those who offer the chats note that not all of the students show up even if they schedule a variety of days and times for the chats throughout the semester.

Role of the Faculty

Many of the Instructors and Peers commented on the role of the faculty in the online class. One Peer was very clear when he wrote, “Feedback, feedback, feedback” (Michels). The types of feedback that faculty discussed included supporting students especially at times when they were frustrated (Valente), and catching students who are “drifting” by emailing them to see what is happening (Capuano). Faculty also saw their role as that of a leader, making the course come alive (Capuano), acting as a “disseminator of accurate information, but even more so, a guide in the pursuit of scientific understanding” (Holmberg). And finally, as may be true in all classes, they note that a sense of humor is a must (Michels).

Pros and Cons of Online Classes

Two of the peers had very specific concerns about teaching online. One was very clear that the style did not match with her own. She found that communicating in writing took too long, she missed tone and body language, and she liked the time restrictions of a block of class time and office hours rather than the “extended anytime” of online classes (Clampet). One of the Instructors notes that one of the challenges of teaching online is that written communications can be misinterpreted. (Vonniessen-Applebee) Another Peer made the observation that students sometimes have difficulty staying on task. In a classroom one can immediately bring them back, but online, “it could be hours or a day before the instructor could try to bring guidance to the discussion. (Cavanaugh).

However, many of those teaching online comment on the advantages it offers. Many feel that they and the students get to know each other better online than in the classroom through the use of the threaded discussion (Barker). Some believe students feel safer participating online because they are not in a classroom (Capuano). They also believe that both the asynchronicity of the discussion and the time it takes to compose a written response give students time to contemplate the question and often lead to more thoughtful responses than are generated in a classroom (Capuano, Vonniessen-Applebee). Several Peers and Instructors commented that online students are better prepared, produce higher quality work, and demonstrate higher quality writing skills (Dorsey). This may be partially due to self-selection, but in general there is no way to come to an online class and sit in the back without doing the reading or being prepared (Michels). If you are in the class you are participating. Another advantage of an online environment is that students can be more self-directed. Web based material can contain hyperlinks which students are encouraged to “explore and discover” for themselves (Dupille). Also the course material is always available. Students can review content, assignments, or due dates at any time (Clampet).

One Instructor compared online and onground classes this way, “It takes more work—emails, additional posts, attempts at making the questions fun—to create a vibrant online atmosphere. Compared to average classroom experiences, I do believe that good online courses are superior. I would agree, however, that as of this date in 2003, the best classroom experiences are generally better than the best online experiences” (Capuano). By the end of this project, it was apparent that not all the participants would agree.

Conclusion

As was discussed in the methodology section, the design of the research had a negative impact on the study and on the richness of the results. The asynchronous nature and web availability of online classes provide a unique opportunity to examine what types of practices have the most positive impact on student learning in this environment. Further research should avoid many of the methodological mistakes which slowed, and in some cases, hampered the research.

Nevertheless, it is clear, from this study, that most online instructors have spent considerable time and energy on understanding how to create a positive learning environment online. As is true onground, faculty use the online environment in many different ways, but in general have focused on those aspects of the course management systems that provide advantages to learning and to teaching. Despite the methodological problems with the study, the Instructors and Peer observers together helped paint a complex picture of the online instructional designs, assessments, assignments, student interactions, collaborative projects, and innovative uses of the web that are employed in the variety of classes which were part of the study. Many of those practices are outlined in the text and in Appendix B below.

Appendix A: Participating Faculty

Online Instructor	Course	Peer Observer
Anthony Benoit Three Rivers Community College	ENV K1100: Environmental Science	Tara Holmberg Northwestern Community College
Daryl Capuano Charter Oak State College	POL SCI 300: The Modern Presidency	David Cavanaugh Community College
Doug Dorsey Manchester Community College	BUS 214: Managerial Communications	Irene Clampet Three Rivers Community College
Anne Barker Sacred Heart University	NU 250: Leadership and Management	Mitch Holmes Naugatuck Valley Community College
Sandra Valente Naugatuck Valley Community College	Psychology 101: Introduction to Psychology	Leonard Dupille Manchester Community College
Rose Bednarz Charter Oak State College	BUS 350: Studies in Entrepreneurship	Steve Paulone Teikyo Post University
Sandra Vonniessen-Applebee Teikyo Post University	MGT 304: Gender Issues in Management	Steven Michels Sacred Heart University

Appendix B: Best Practices

Course Design

Group course content into modules: *an example of a seven module course: (a) Module Overview; (b) Performance Objectives; (c) Major Content Summary; (d) Readings including Web links (e) Exercises; (f) Study Journal Exercises; (g) Assignments; and (h) Class Discussion (Forum).* (Barker)

Links to Student services: provide links from the homepage to advising, counseling, technology support, and library services. (Valente)

Embed URL links: include specific websites that support course content within the lectures. When links are embedded within course content, instructors must check them frequently to make sure they work. (Valente)

Course Scavenger Hunt: provide students with a fun way to become familiar with the course and its content by creating a “game” where students race to see who can identify all of the listed items first. (Clampet)

Use Standardized Forms: make learning units easily identifiable through the utilization of a template format. Once students recognize there is a pattern involved it became easier to navigate the course content. (Paulone)

Assessment/Assignment

A Study Journal: students keep a journal that chronicles their course activities. It provides the opportunity for students to demonstrate they have done the work. It prompts the student to engage in critical thinking and self-reflection. It is self-paced and is collected at midterm and final. (Barker)

Online Debate Teams: create two virtual teams. Students are compelled to argue both sides of a controversial issue. They must get engaged with the material in their initial posts. One team argues the pro side of an argument, and the other team argues the con. Next, the two teams switch and argue the opposing point of view. After this exchange, each student writes a reaction paper where they can discuss how this process shaped their opinion on the subject. In the debate section, students interact with students. In the reaction papers, they must interact with their own reflections. (Capuano)

To Prevent Plagiarism: have assignments completed in stages i.e. outline, first draft etc. Provide the student with information describing the concept of plagiarism and what it entails and also how to provide citation of reference materials. (Michels)

Have student reflect and make connections to the course material: Ask questions that require students to take a position on an issue or relate it to their own lives and experiences. (Vonniessen-Applebee)

Provide an outline/progress report: clearly list all course objectives, assignments, discussions and tests with corresponding maximum point values. Students are asked to check off the course objectives that they have met and then enter the date assignments are submitted. They enter their grades as they are posted to Blackboard. Each student is required to submit the progress report as a mid-term evaluation and then again at the end of the course. (Bednarz)

Use Rubrics or clear grading guidelines: Help students understand exactly what you expect from them in any assignment. Rubrics or guidelines with examples help.

Assessment and Evaluation Rubric for All Assignments (Capuano):

Quality. Quality of thought is difficult to explain but easy to see. At a bare minimum, you must demonstrate the ability to adequately explain historical facts. To do well, however, you must go beyond simply repeating from the text and instead demonstrate that you have invested some independent thought in the questions presented. Here are a few considerations for what constitutes quality, in order of difficulty:

Clean presentation. Substance matters more than form. Yet, college level structure, grammar, and spelling will be reviewed.

Accuracy in describing concepts and facts. Students need to convey an accurate understanding of the facts. For example, if you were describing the factors leading to entry into World War II, you would need to discuss Pearl Harbor.

Completion in describing concepts and facts. For example, in addition to discussing Pearl Harbor as a contributing factor to our entry in World War II, you would need to discuss additional facts such as the alliance between the U.S. and Great Britain and Franklin Roosevelt's friendship with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Ability to draw conclusions from facts. For example, if you were asked to describe foreign policy failures by John Kennedy you would need to conclude that The Bay of the Pigs as opposed to the Cuban Missile Crisis was one such failure.

Ability to discuss patterns by drawing upon many parts to describe a whole. For example, if you were asked to describe factors relating to our policy in Viet Nam, you might draw upon McCarthyism (which created a fear of Communism); The Bay of the Pigs (which made Kennedy fear being labeled weak against Communism); the Domino Theory (which proposed that if one country fell to Communism then neighboring countries would fall as dominos); Johnson's refusal to be the first US President to lose a war and other factors that will emerge from your understanding of what led to the Viet Nam war.

Creative ability to not only describe patterns but also to demonstrate some independent thought. For example, you may describe the patterns above contributing to the Viet Nam war and then add a twist that our involvement reflected some part of our national cultural personality dating back to Manifest Destiny and our desire to shape the world according to our perspective that we are meant to be the world's dominant country. Assuming you are able to support your thesis with evidence and convincing argument, this quality factor will be achieved.

Threaded Discussion Grading Rubric (Vonniessen-Applebee)

- Grade on the thoughtfulness and detail of the answer to the prompt/question posed for discussion
- 0 = no response
- 5 = 1 response
- 6/7 = made 2 responses but not much depth of thought
- 8/9 = responses reflected thought and synthesis of material
- 10 = they went above and beyond.

Interaction and Collaboration

Have students Post Introductions : in discussion threads at the beginning of a course and require them to respond to two other students within the discussion promote interaction familiarity between students in the course. (Valente, Bednarz, Vonniessen-Applebee)

Use Introductions to build student profiles: create a profile of each student in a word document, capturing the information the student is sharing about him/herself. Use this information in future interactions with the student to become more familiar with his/her life, personality, work, etc. (Bednarz)

Post student responses and writing assignments to the discussion page: using structured questions, and require students to respond to what is posted. This encourages students to interact and reflect on course subject matter. (Valente)

Invite Virtual Guest Speakers to the class: this provides students with an opportunity to interact with someone in a field or subject area related to the course. Students communicate to the speaker in groups. Each group must first decide together on the two questions they will ask the speaker. Approximately one week is available for the guest speaker to asynchronously communicate with the groups. (Bednarz)

Create an “Ask the Instructor” Thread: this is a public page where students can post their questions to the course Instructor. In answering the student, the Instructor is providing information that is shared with the entire class, disseminating information that could be of value to others. (Vonniessen-Applebee)

Create Group Course Conferences: sequester work groups by giving them each their own private folder in which to discuss their assignment or case study. This enables collaboration on team projects by removing traditional student objections of time/place meeting constraints. Also, it can become quite apparent through the thread how engaged students are in the project. This makes the assessment process easier for the Instructor. (Vonniessen-Applebee, Paulone, Bednarz)