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## Student Facilitation, Self-Assessment Can Improve Threaded Discussions

Facilitating and assessing threaded discussions can be quite time consuming for online instructors, especially in a class with many students or with a very active discussion board. But instructors do not have to take on this burden alone. By sharing these responsibilities with students, instructors can save time while improving the course by increasing student responsibility and self-awareness, says Dale Vidmar, library instruction and distance education coordinator at Southern Oregon University.

To start, Vidmar says that participation should be graded to improve student connectedness and motivate them to post. Unfortunately, many instructors do not grade participation in a formalized way, choosing instead to make it count 10 percent of the grade: If students seemed active in the discussion boards, they get full credit.

The problem with this approach is that it doesn't account for the quality of that participation. But assessing each student's posts might take more time and effort than is reasonable. Instead, Vidmar recommends student self-assessment.

### Discussion rubric

At the beginning of the course he gives students a participation

rubric. This rubric will differ from course to course to suit the course's learning objectives.

Vidmar stresses punctuality, proper grammar, and content quality in his rubric. "If students are participating the way I want, they're writing well-organized, well-written sentences. They're posting early, adding to the discussion and ending with questions that add to the discussion," Vidmar says.

Vidmar tells students that posting well before the deadline will give them the best chance of engaging their classmates in a meaningful discussion. "Someone who posts early and often throughout the discussion actually tends to further the discussion better than somebody who does the assignment right before the deadline, but students have to be guided in that behavior."

Vidmar also lets student know that he expects posts to be concise, limiting a comment to one or two points and explaining the logic of those point or making a reference to some other work that supports the ideas expressed in the message.

It's important to link the rubric to the questions asked in the threaded discussions, Vidmar says. "If I have on my rubric that I want

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### TIPS FROM THE PROS

#### Preparing to Teach Online

If you are preparing to teach a course online for the first time, consider the following preparation advice from Diablo Valley College:

- Teach the course face to face the semester before teaching it online.
- After each class session, take 15-20 minutes to write some about what you did that day. This will give you an idea of what you would like to accomplish in the online course.
- Assess which elements of your course need to be modified to work in the online environment. Activities like textbook readings may not need any modification, but if your on-site course features elements like experiments, movies, or group work, you will have to consider how to convey the same experience online.
- Design one assignment. If the student deliverable is an essay, convert/design the unit to get a feel for how much time it will take to convert the rest of the course. Keep in mind that some courses and some

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students to analyze different perspectives, then I have to ask a question that offers them the opportunity to do that. Otherwise, how can I have that function in the rubric?"

In addition, Vidmar illustrates his expectations by providing examples of previous students' posts and having them distinguish between good and bad responses.

#### Starting a thread

Vidmar often begins a threaded discussion by assigning a reading, having each student post an open-ended question about the reading, having students respond to each others' questions, and finally ending each response with another question. Vidmar does this because "formulating open-ended questions often takes higher level thinking than just formulating a response."

To improve student learning, he has each student moderate a discussion "because the person facilitating the discussion is the person learning it."

Students moderate in groups of two or three. They can choose their questions from a list Vidmar compiles from the previous discussions, or they can come up with their own.

Once all the groups have led a discussion, Vidmar has each student do a self assessment, telling them to take two or three of their best posts and explain why they think this is their best work based on the rubric.

"The fact that a student can look at his or her own work and distinguish the qualities of a well-written piece, I think, is probably doing more for them in terms of getting them to think critically and reflect upon their work than any grading a professor can do," Vidmar says.

In addition to providing students with formative assessment, reading these detailed self assessments, Vidmar can check them in case the students are overly critical of themselves or otherwise off base in their comments about their work and will challenge them on these self assessments.

Doing assessment this way also gives Vidmar a better idea of the quality of each student's work than he would have gotten by assessing each student based on his impressions as a facilitator. And because of its accuracy, threaded discussion participation often counts more than 10 percent — sometimes up to 40 percent — of the final grade in his courses.

Threaded discussions are most useful in addressing ambiguities within a subject, and not all courses lend themselves to their prominent use. Deciding their role is up to the instructor, Vidmar says.

"If an instructor could not see a relevant way of making a discussion function in their class, then they shouldn't do it. It's got to be like any other piece of their course, something they've chosen to do and they've made a piece of their evaluation.

"I don't think it's necessarily subject bound. I've seen [threaded discussions] work in different environments, but it's important that the instructor believes that they can make it work."

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## Student and Faculty Views of Streaming Video

The University of Maine's Continuing and Distance Education Department began offering video streaming courses during the 2001–2002 academic year based on the standard interactive television (ITV) model — simultaneously serving on-site and distance students. In 2003 the CED and University College conducted a formal study of streaming video as a course delivery method.

The study consisted of a pencil-and-paper survey of students taking video streaming courses in spring 2003 and interviews with faculty who taught via video streaming in either fall 2002 or spring 2003.

### Delivery methods

The courses in the study were selected because of an interest in the various departments to expand their offerings to students around the state. The courses were knowledge management & decision support systems, linear systems analysis, microelectronics science & engineering, literature from the Vietnam War, world food and nutrition, and social psychology.

The courses were taught in the standard interactive television classroom with a group of students present. A distance education technician captured live video streams and made them available through a WebCT course site, FirstClass folder, or instructor's website. Students had the option of viewing the streams synchronously or asynchronously.

### The survey

Eighty-three student surveys were completed, and 13 faculty members were interviewed with the following results:

- Most distance students participated asynchronously and used

asynchronous modes of communication when interacting with the instructor and classmates. Students used e-mail most often to communicate, followed by computer conferencing.

- For two-thirds of the students, this was their first course that used streaming video.
- Students appreciated the flexibility the archives provided (e.g., the ability to review class sessions, the ability to resolve scheduling conflicts).
- Students appreciated online class notes and PowerPoint presentations.
- 90 percent of on-site students were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with opportunities for interaction, which suggests that the video streaming component did not negatively affect the in-class experience.
- 53 percent of students would "definitely" take another course in this format, and 34 percent responded "maybe." Most faculty said they would be willing to teach another streaming video course.

The surveys indicated the following issues with streaming video courses:

- Faculty and students noted that viewing some course materials and computer output classroom TV monitors and QuickTime streams was difficult.
- The two-day lag between a live session and the posting of the archive was inconvenient for some.
- Synchronous distance students found it inconvenient to interact live with the instructor and other students.

Glenn LeBlanc, instructional designer at University College, expected that most distance students would choose to access the course asynchronously, given the convenience it offered. "The few students who were actually watching the stream live found that interacting in real time to be very cumbersome, and I think that's another factor that encouraged them to watch the archive instead," LeBlanc says.

LeBlanc was surprised, however, by the number of students who accessed the course with 56k modems even though they were explicitly told that the streaming video requires a broadband connection. "It suggests that students are selecting for convenience and are probably willing to tolerate problems with the stream," he says.

While this study did not compare learning outcomes between on-campus and distance students, previous studies that LeBlanc has conducted showed "no significant difference" between the two groups, which is consistent with other studies.

As for student satisfaction, on-site and distance students were equally satisfied with the courses but probably for different reasons. "I think there's always the tendency for convenience to outweigh other factors," LeBlanc says.

Since the study, University College has:

- made information about the need for broadband connections more prominent
- replaced TV monitors in the ITV classrooms with higher-resolution monitors
- reduced the time it takes to produce video archives by making the archives directly from the

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# HYBRID COURSES

## Questioning the Hybrid Model

Hybrid courses — combinations of face-to-face classroom instruction with asynchronous online elements — are frequently spoken of as the future of e-learning, a “best of both worlds” merger of old and new. Yet Dr. Saxon G. Reasons, instructional technology services programming manager at the University of Southern Indiana, has seen data and collected anecdotes that make her question that scenario. She and her colleagues have gathered evidence that shows that hybrid courses have some distinctive problems of their own to work out before they become the preferred format.

At the University of Southern Indiana, Reasons runs a faculty development workshop for teachers making the jump from classroom to online teaching. It’s called the Institute for Online Teaching and Learning. She assists colleagues in distance learning course development and leads technology-related training for faculty, staff, and the community.

Teachers who pass through the program are often brought back to report to the next group of teachers on their first-hand experiences with online teaching — sharing their “war stories.”

Two of Reason’s colleagues in the Institute, Kevin Valadares, who teaches health care administration, and Michael Slavkin in teacher education, began to notice something in the stories they were hearing. “We were noticing some anomalies in the reports we were getting,” says Valadares. “We noticed similar trends in a number of different hybrid courses.” Despite solid course design and frequent instructor communication, student disengagement leading to attrition, was posing a challenge. “We were really

noticing these anecdotal things on hybrid courses. So we got together to collect data to find out what was going on.”

Reasons, Valadares, and Slavkin found some evidence to suggest that students in hybrid courses actually may fare worse than students enrolled in on-campus or completely internet-based course sections.

“We focused on three different styles of delivery,” says Valadares. “All face-to face, all online, and hybrid. We weren’t trying to compare which of the three methods was better. But we noticed that, with three different outcomes, it was with hybrid courses that students and faculty felt they faced the greatest challenges.”

Many of the USI hybrid courses were similarly structured — with classes meeting face-to-face six out of 15 weeks, and with Blackboard as a course management system.

“It goes against the grain of the literature,” Reasons admits, “that says that hybrid is the best of both worlds. It’s quickly becoming the most popular format in distance education. Our results buck against that.”

“We like to be rebels down here,” she laughs.

Reasons and her colleagues did not believe the difficulties the students were encountering were due to course design. “It’s easy to point to course design. But this was solid course design. We were confident of the course design. So the problems that we found were real.”

As part of a formal research project, they began to gather more than anecdotal evidence about experience with hybrid courses. “What we gathered,” says Reasons, “is that [hybrid courses] take more work from the student, and more coaching from the faculty because you have to

strike a balance. You [the instructor] have to be sure communication cues are in the right places. Students who know how to look for the cues [in the face-to-face classroom] may be thrown off balance.”

### Switching modes causes confusion

There is a sense of confusion, Reasons asserts, in hybrid courses — “One you don’t find in an all-online or in all-face-to-face environments. In total face-to-face, or total distance, there’s no confusion — you meet three times a week or not at all. We have certain expectations when the class physically meets, and other when it doesn’t.”

Reasons and her colleagues maintain that their research shows that it’s hard to have to keep shifting and adjusting those expectations in the hybrid scenario. Reasons mentions the “the out of sight, out of mind thing” — the phenomenon of students in hybrid courses losing track of the course when they are not in the face-to-face mode.

It was not just first-time distance learners who fell into this trap. “Hybrid can be confusing,” Reasons says. “One class might meet six times in a term; another class two, another eight. A student might be enrolled in all of those at the same time. If you’re taking three face-to-face courses, you know what to expect. But you can be continuously confused about expectations for hybrid courses,” says Reasons.

“This is not an overall criticism of hybrid courses,” Reasons says, “because they serve great purposes.” Reasons notes that circumstances particular to their campus allow her and her colleagues to be

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# Multimedia Helps Online Courses Simulate Face-to-Face Interactivity

When Richard Payne, coordinator of multimedia at Chattanooga State Technical Community College, helps faculty incorporate multimedia into their courses, he begins with the premise that students take online courses for convenience and flexibility, not because they want to avoid interacting with the instructor and classmates.

"The vast majority of our online students would be traditional students if they could be," Payne says. "If online instruction is the only way they can do their thing, why do we preclude them from participating in class the way they would if they could?"

"They would love to be in an environment where they could talk to their instructor, talk to each other, know what every person looks like, hear their voices, see their hand gestures — all those things that are part of a traditional classroom that unfortunately get left out in the online classroom, unless you put in some sort of technology to make that possible."

### Interactivity options

To bring this type of interactivity to the online classroom, the Center for Distributed Education offers faculty a wide range of options, including audio and video.

Two technologies Payne helps faculty with are eXpressIT! and vMail, related software packages that add audio, video, graphics, and interaction capabilities to online courses without the need for broadband.

EXpressIT! is an interface that opens in a separate browser within a course that can activate audio and video conferencing, chat, and a whiteboard.

VMail enables instructors and

students — provided they have a web camera and microphone — to send and receive video e-mail messages.

Both technologies work with 56k connections and require only a Flash plug-in because Expressive Networks (<http://expressivenetworks.com/>) streams this multimedia content from its server.

When somebody records a vMail message, it is streamed from the

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**"If you only had audio and video interaction, then you're going to have the talkative people taking over. Those same people might not ever write anything. There has to be a balance."**

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sender's computer to the company's computer, which records it in a streaming format. The recipient gets an e-mail with a link that contains the message.

Payne says that most of the instructors who use eXpressIT! use it in an advising role, when they are collaborating one on one with a student.

It offers the advantage of communicating synchronously using a variety of tools to help illustrate a point. This is particularly effective in courses that have mathematical problems. Using the whiteboard, the instructor can write out a problem while simultaneously explaining to the student what he or she is doing.

Some instructors hold online meetings in which they use chat, whiteboards, and video. The

instructor has the option of using the moderator mode to call on students. In video mode, when a student is called on, his or her video image appears on the screen of those in the meeting.

The chat feature uses standard annotation to indicate who is making a particular comment.

The system also enables participants to show each other web pages within the browser. They also can use a pointer and voice to discuss the site.

### Faculty preferences

The point of all these features is that most of faculty Payne work with teach in the classroom, and because they come from that environment they usually like to include interaction with students that is similar to what they would have face to face. Payne doesn't force these technologies on anyone but offers them as options. Some courses — like math and physics — can benefit more from the added technology than others because of the formulas and graphics that need to be explained in depth.

"We definitely don't encourage people to use something just because it's there. We can spot some folks who are going to have some problems. We encourage them to start off slow by using the web, e-mail, and discussion groups," Payne says.

### A balanced perception

He also recommends that instructors use a variety of course elements to get a more balanced view of students' work.

For example, Payne once took an

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# Structuring Online Courses to Engage, Guide Students

Like many distance educators, Samantha Birk, instructional designer and fine arts instructor at Indiana-University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, had little knowledge of what she was getting herself into when she was approached to develop and teach a distance course in 1996. She began by making videotapes of her lectures and basically did what she did in class.

Realizing the importance of communication, Birk used the TopClass platform and relied heavily on text and e-mail communication, but “the onslaught of text was so heavy and trying to keep up with getting all those responses read and graded and returned was monotonous for me and my students,” she says. “I also didn’t think they were learning as much and were as engaged with the material as I would like.”

Using this approach, Birk, “suffered miserably” in her early attempts at distance education. So she started looking at the pedagogy — learning objectives, different textbooks, pacing, and structure. From feedback, she learned that the students weren’t watching the videotapes, and she considered ways of breaking the monotony.

Birk has found that varying the course structure improves learning. “When I try to vary the structure of the course, when I created things like more topical learning discussion groups ... I find I get much more thought-provoking and engaging discussions,” she says.

Her first consideration in redesigning her course was the environment. “When you teach a class of 20 students, you’re going to teach that class much differently than if you teach in a lecture hall of 300. The same thing goes when you teach online. You really need to look

at the structure and pace of the course,” Birk says.

After considering the environment, Birk chose a thematic approach. In the on-campus version of the course, she would introduce a topic for the class session, show slides, and have students apply what they learned in their reading, discussing the materials and the medium the artists use.

Birk originally required students to write five-page papers every two weeks, but that tended to interfere with their learning. “There was so much emphasis on writing the papers that students wouldn’t always stop to think about the topic,” she says. “When I started varying the types of assignments and pacing them out, it gave students more time to sink into the material.”

### A thematic assignment

Here’s an example of a thematic assignment: In a unit called “Sacred Spaces,” students read material from the textbook (which is important because they expect to have a textbook and it makes them feel a little bit more connected to the whole college experience), read some additional material online, and access a QuickTime Virtual Reality tour of St. Peter’s in Rome. The QTVR is a project Birk developed several years ago that allows students to virtually navigate around St. Peter’s with a mouse. It includes supporting materials that discuss the colonnade and how it separates the apartment buildings and offices from the basilica.

“I use that as an example, and they have different exercises like that they can experience online,” Birk says.

During this unit, the students engage in small-group discussions

that ask open-ended questions about the materials. And the major assignment for this unit is to go out into the community and compare secular space with sacred space and compare how light is used in these different spaces using terminology from the reading assignments and other course materials.

Birk clearly sees the benefits of multimedia in her course such as the QTVR, and she would like to include more content like this to engage students, but it takes time. It requires getting used to teaching online, rethinking the course, learning the course platform, and learning Flash, QuickTime, or other multimedia software.

“Those are a lot of things to deal with at once, and I see this as a progression. It’s important to get the root of the course down — What are your objectives? How are you going to approach and meet them?” she says.

### Supplementary materials

Web resources and CDs that come with textbooks are also good sources of course materials, but Birk is careful about what she includes in the course because most of the students who take the course are freshmen.

“I do send them to internet sites, but I have to do it cautiously because I want to make sure that the sites I send them to fit with the structure of the class,” she says. “For example, I may find a website that focuses on the Roman Forum, but it may be from a political versus a visual arts perspective. This is a 100-level course. I try to be a little bit careful so they don’t drift away,” she says.

In addition to carefully selecting

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course materials, Birk makes each unit self-contained — using internal and external links in each unit to make the course more user-friendly.

“They don’t have to go scattering around. They don’t have to come back to a course homepage to access their e-mail or to take a quiz. Everything is in one place. It creates this envelope that surrounds the topic,” Birk says.

Birk also designs each unit with a distinct look — the background colors, fonts, and images are consistent throughout the unit to make it clear that the topics discussed in the unit relate to one another and to help students navigate the course.

### Introducing content and technology

One of the challenges of teaching online is making sure that students know how to access the materials and learn how to be good online learners without distracting students from the course content.

“If you have students who are enrolled in a class and you’re asking

them to do a research paper, you probably will go to the library and give them an introduction to doing research.

“If you’re teaching a class online, part of your responsibility is to help them figure out how to navigate the class. We’re fortunate that we have a really good IT help desk, but some of this is the faculty’s responsibility,” Birk says.

To introduce students to the course, the first unit weaves together strategies for getting them settled into the course with introducing the content of the course, and setting up the learning dynamics that they would have through the entire semester.

For example, the first quiz asks questions about the first reading, but it also asks questions they would know only if they read the syllabus,” Birk says.

During that first unit, which spans two weeks so students don’t feel too much pressure if they enroll in the course after the semester starts, students are asked to write about something they pass every day that they would consider a work

of art. They post this on the discussion board — a tool they will use throughout the semester — read each other’s messages and ask questions. “It’s a way of introducing the tool as well as introducing students to each other.”

Birk stresses that good course design will vary according to content. She has seen some courses that require little more than text-based materials because of the quality of the writing. Some materials benefit from a simple design, while others benefit from detailed presentation.

“I think the core of it, no matter how you’re going to do it is to really start by looking at what you’re teaching and what your objectives are. What is it that makes this interesting? How am I going to make this interesting? How am I going to make it so the students are going to come home, turn on their computers, access the class, and want to learn?”

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online sociology course in which all the interaction took place in discussion groups. Many of the students did not express themselves very well in writing. There were misspelled words and improper grammar. “Unfortunately, I found that it gave me a perception of them that probably wasn’t fair. I had never seen these people before. I didn’t know anything about them. I couldn’t hear them, and it was often difficult to discern whether or not they were angry or joking,” Payne says. “Maybe [technologies like eXpressIT! and

vMail] can give people another way to be more articulate.”

Payne sees the need for a variety of technologies to provide this balanced assessment of students’ capabilities while also addressing their preferred communication styles. “I don’t know that anybody is eliminating the threaded discussion. If you only had audio and video interaction, then you’re going to have the talkative people taking over. Those same people might not ever write anything. There has to be a balance.”

Contact Richard Payne at [richard.payne@chattanooga.state.edu](mailto:richard.payne@chattanooga.state.edu). 

## Share Your Ideas

If you have developed an innovative online course or have some online teaching tips you would like to share with the readers of *Online Classroom*, contact Rob Kelly at [robkelly@magnapubs.com](mailto:robkelly@magnapubs.com).

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streams rather than from a digital tape.

In some cases the number of students taking the course at a distance was rather small, which affected the way faculty designed their courses for distance students, LeBlanc says. "If the faculty had only a few students at a distance, and most of the students were in the origination classroom live with them, I think it was a question for them of whether it was worth the

effort to change all their materials for the benefit of just a few students," he says.

This, he says, is an issue of marketing and institutional commitment to distance education. "How is this perceived by the faculty and the administration? Are they teaching primarily to on-campus students? What incentives do faculty really have for thinking of their courses as true distance courses and making the appropriate changes in graphics? All of that is very time consuming, especially for faculty who have a lot of complicat-

ed material."

Before streaming really takes hold and reaches "critical mass" where making the appropriate changes to all the course material for courses taught this way, LeBlanc recommends that instructors make as much of the material as possible available off-line and provide students with as much contact with faculty as possible through the telephone, office hours, and online communication.

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objective. "Some campuses have space issues, and so by default, hybrid is a necessity. We have the luxury of doing as much or as little hybrid as we wish – so our motive is disinterested."

### A problem with advisement

On another level, Reasons says, the difficulty they have noticed with hybrid courses may be partly a problem with advisement. "A lot of the problem is poor advisement into hybrid courses. Advisers may think that a student who has to work full time, or has a family is automatically a good candidate for an online or hybrid course, but is it in the student's best interest to advise them into these kinds of classes without knowing more about the students past experience or learning style? You have to look at the student's experience," Reasons warns.

"In a lot of respects," Reasons admits, "hybrids are simply necessary. In language departments, it can be quite successful to combine face-to-face with online delivery, to practice conversation in a more authentic way."

### Instructor shortcomings

Valadares and Slavkin have also

noted that there is a tendency on the part of the instructors in hybrid courses to keep the online part relatively superficial. And a tendency on the part of students to do the minimum in asynchronous discussions as opposed to the face-to-face classroom discussion. Instructors can see this in a paucity of thoughtful messages posted on the discussion board. Reasons points out that the discussion board poses a special challenge in the hybrid format. In classroom discussion, the professor is an active presence; later however, on the discussion board, instructors tend to be minimally involved. That, too, is confusing to students, says Reasons.

"I don't think it's a good idea to assume that hybrid, because it's a marriage, is the best way to go," Reasons concludes from their study. Active learning in itself is an uncomfortable process, she points out, but participating fully in an online course is more difficult still.

Reasons and her colleagues believe nonetheless that all classes are, in a sense, slowly becoming hybrids. Says Reasons, "The way the trend is going is that there may not be true face-to-face classes anymore, just because people are using the tools more and more. The combination of online elements as sup-

port for face-to-face classes is only going to grow. That's what makes it necessary to take a look at how this works. The notion of really looking at hybrid from a critical perspective is good from the perspective of the students, the faculty, and the administration."

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units will be easier to create for online delivery than others.

- Look at other courses/websites, and note what you like and dislike about them in terms of design, content, delivery methods.
- Consider which type of course design — web-enhanced, hybrid, or fully online — is most appropriate for your course goals.

### Reference

"Thinking About Teaching Online?" Diablo Valley College Accessed on April 21, 2004 at [www.dvc.edu/it/TeachingTechnology/index.htm](http://www.dvc.edu/it/TeachingTechnology/index.htm). @