



Creating Excitement through Active Learning Opportunities in Fully Online Courses in Sociology

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Abstract

The paradigm of active learning continues to be emphasized in U.S. higher education, at all levels, where traditional lecture formats have made good use of new teaching technologies to engage students beyond passive listening. Today, lists of best practices or ideas of more detailed active learning strategies are shared across disciplines and institutions. [1] The widespread use of active learning strategies in the U.S. reflects the understanding that it yields positive learning outcomes. [2] Online courses pose benefits and challenges for active learning. The move towards hybrid courses where online course delivery formats are melded with traditional face-to-face meetings offer excellent opportunities to facilitate active learning, while fully online learning courses on the other hand have greater challenges. In the latter, students often engage in online courses asynchronously, may never see each other or their instructors face-to-face, and they face other constraints. Even their kinesthetic options are typically reduced to clicking or swiping fingers across digital tablets. Yet, in other ways, students in strictly online courses must take greater control of their own learning, by maintaining self-discipline and contact, thus leaving open the possibility that they can be engaged actively, if differently, than in the face-to-face classroom. In some disciplines, this is easier than in others. In sociology where active learning exercises have long been an important component of the face-to-face classroom, the opportunities are particularly good for translating active learning strategies to the fully online forum. The author proposes to present a number of active learning strategies for sociology online courses, demonstrating their usefulness in creating excitement in the virtual classroom while meeting concrete learning outcomes.

1. Introduction

Active learning is a frequent element of the documented learning outcomes of many U.S. institutions of higher education. As a teaching strategy, active learning is used across disciplines, levels and learning environments. It exists in various iterations and is commonly seen as an effective teaching model in traditional face-to-face and hybrid online courses. Over two decades ago, Bonwell and Eison portrayed active learning teaching strategies such as role-playing and case study explorations as ways to create excitement in learning. [3] Much more recently, Kuh has pointed to learning communities, collaborative learning, capstone courses and projects, and service-based learning as among ten top high impact practices that spur student engagement in U.S. post-secondary education [4], while in the sciences, Eberlein et al. recognize problem-based learning, process-oriented guided inquiry learning, and peer-led team learning as among the most common active learning practices. [5] However, courses that are fully online, that exist only virtually, may present different challenges and new opportunities for the model and strategies of active learning. The variety of student experiences and motivational levels, and the interface and tools available for online courses all require that fully-online courses be carefully designed, adjusted, and monitored in ways that may exceed those of face-to-face or hybrid online courses. This paper presents the outcomes of a decade of experience in using active learning teaching tools successfully in fully-online courses in sociology, a discipline well-matched to active learning strategies, (see for example McKinney and Heyl). [6]

2. The challenges of active learning in online courses

Currently, in 2013, U.S. college students logging on to fully online courses bring with them a variety of online and personal experiences. Some students may be taking their first online course, while others have had such courses for several years, while others are already experimenting with MOOCs (massive open online courses). Some students will be well-versed in a particular learning management system, like Moodle or Canvas or Blackboard, while others may not. Some may use online tools regularly in their personal lives, while others will have far less exposure and access to these. Some students will log on religiously, others will access courses asynchronously, while still



others will check in far less often. Many may never see each other, or their instructors, or even the physical campus associated with their institution. Some will be self-disciplined about their schoolwork, others will lack sufficient self-direction. Dale and Lane note that most students will be strategic about their learning online, doing just what they need to pass the course [7], while Knight acknowledges that smaller percentages will strive for deeper learning. [8]

What online courses have going for them is that course materials, such as lectures, exercises and quizzes are typically available for viewing and reviewing over and over. Yet, having such access to course resources does not in and of itself create learning engagement; viewing or downloading course materials may be an activity, but as Mogus et al.'s tracking study shows, not all page viewing is correlated with successful course grades [9], or with intellectual engagement and learning for that matter. Fortunately, online education itself has evolved from a fairly static, flat presentation of course materials available for viewing as was typical in the first generation of online courses, to what Toth calls a Web 2.0 generation of online education where course content is integrated dynamically with online discussions, collaborative work, and ever newer online resources. [10] In this current online teaching environment with its more interactive tools and resources, students can do more than simply view a page, but the challenge is to choose promising tools and then get the students to use them effectively, so that rigorous engagement and moments of learning excitement are possible, and so that learning outcomes can be successfully achieved. Some students may be quite eager to use the technological tools, but, as Deed and Edwards suggest in their example of unstructured blogs as active learning tools, without ample structure and guidance, students tend not to use them rigorously and critically, thus making such tools less successful as means towards promoting learning outcomes. [11] Likewise, with collaborative or group work, which is increasingly an important institutional expectations at many American colleges and universities, these must be carefully designed, so that they are effective complements, but not necessarily substitutes for individual work, as Prince notes for the engineering fields. [12] Thus, finding the right tools to make active learning possible in a fully-online environment requires testing, adjusting, tweaking.

Finally, to account for the different experiences of students and the many kinds of technological tools available for engaging them, instructors must maintain close supervision and management of the course. The effective instructor must be actively engaged herself. This benefits not just the weaker students, but rewards or encourages those who do actively pursue the engagement opportunities. [13]

3. Active learning strategies for online courses

The course learning and engagement outcomes in my fully-online courses are based broadly on the institutional learning outcomes at one of my institutions, Cascadia Community College, in Bothell, Washington, USA. The outcomes are expressed as such: "Think critically, creatively, reflectively. Learn actively, Interact in diverse and complex environments. Communicate with Clarity and Originality." [14] These inform in part the engagement goals for my courses across multiple institutions and my choices of online assessment tools. I lead students towards structured active learning engagements with frequent forays into additional learning opportunities, so that students discover what they KNOW, and can APPLY, SHARE, and EXPLORE. Carefully structured active learning engagements come about through assessment tools that I call **participation exercises**, **group assignments**, and **individual assignments**, and while the more spontaneously created additional opportunities emerge from **course announcements**, and **optional active learning opportunities** through which I, as the instructor, prod, reward and model learning engagement.

Participation Exercises

I use tightly constructed participation exercises frequently and dynamically, assigning one or more per week. These create incentives for students to log on throughout each module (with staggered deadlines each week), and students receive direct and varied opportunities to discover what they KNOW before the lesson, or to APPLY what they have learned or to SHARE during a lesson. For example, early in one week of a sociology of family course I offer an unlimited-attempt true and false quiz on the history of family, which students may retake it until they realize that all of the answers are false, which is at once a way to introduce our topic, and a way to illustrate the myths which often cloud what we know about the sociology of family. Other ways to introduce what we KNOW now and can expect to discover include the use of multimedia sources, such as an interactive graph on gender differences in incomes on a news journal website, or a virtual visit to a research center website where



students can explore the data methodology. Participation exercises in the form of discussion forums and course wikis allow students to brainstorm, compile ideas, and APPLY and SHARE their thinking as it is elicited by the reading of a news article, the viewing of a documentary film or shorter video clip, or the casual observing of a public setting. Participation exercises can also be spontaneously added through the course, such as the last minute discussion forum created in one course after the surprise announcement of the retirement of the Catholic pope. Students were invited to SHARE their interpretations of this event and APPLY their understanding of its relationship to course topics. These exercises make up from 5-30% of the course's required elements, and I typically require 10 participations over a 10 week course, but offer 1-2 additional ones to provide choices and to be flexible in case of missed participation opportunities

Group Assignments

Group work is complex to organize because of issues with motivation and equal participation, and many students are resistant to it. We know that group learning often contributes to broader learning, and it is one teaching strategy that is adaptable to the kinds of social networking and technology-sharing tools that are available at a given moment. Thanks to the broad range of social networking technologies today, group work is easy to organize and can be successful so long as the efforts are monitored and initially set up by the instructor. I integrate low-stakes group work in all of my courses where groups present short, simple online slide shows using their choice of presentation software. They show what they KNOW, APPLY what they have learned about the sociological perspective, and SHARE among with their classmates by attaching their presentations to a discussion forum. Then, each student comments substantively on two attached presentations via the discussion forum. These assignments are assessed based on group and individual effort, and contribute 5-10% to the students' course grades. The low weighting, and careful instructor monitoring address the varying degrees of student motivations and contributions to the group activity, without unduly punishing those with higher degrees of engagement in the activity than others.

Individual Assignments

Larger individual assignments also challenge students to show what they KNOW, APPLY what they have learned, and show how they might further EXPLORE sociological topics or methods or controversies. These are papers and final exams which comprise 30-35% of the course grade. In one course, a set of two related paper assignments ask students to make and report on some casual observations in a public setting, and then seek an example of actual published sociological research on a related topic, reflecting on what is known and how one might further EXPLORE the topic. In a sociology of religion course, the spontaneously created participation exercise elicited by the retirement of the Catholic pope inspired a final exam question in which students were asked to APPLY theoretical arguments for what makes religious organizations successful and to address these to the new pope. The final exams take place as time- and word-limited essays requiring concrete references to course materials and submitted into online dropboxes.

Announcements

I monitor, I insert spontaneity, and I show instructor engagement each week with course announcements which appear front and center on the course homepage. In these, I synthesize course activities and student efforts, noting particular student contributions, or I sum up student response patterns or point out connections to current events or world developments or calendar dates. Such comments create an online liveliness and acknowledge active learning efforts and personal expressions by the students.

Optional active learning opportunities

Finally, I offer optional learning opportunities throughout the course, designed to get students excited about a topic or to reward those seeking deeper learning. These are presented as simple links to a variety of multimedia tools: to my own audio-recorded Youtube videos on how to read a graph or do research, to Prezi slide shows/games introducing the sociological controversies, to blog posts on related course topics, or to short online news articles or video clips presenting a social situation or condition. At the course conclusion, I share an annotated list of sociologically relevant book titles and popular and documentary films I've collected, on the topics the students have EXPLORED. In this



way, I show my engagement in my own course and discipline, and I leave the students with the opportunity continue their active engagement with sociology.

Conclusion

With carefully structured active learning opportunities in various forms participation exercises, group assignments, individual assignments interjected with doses of more spontaneously created ones—via announcements and optional opportunities, students in fully-online courses can be actively engaged to learn and to reach their course and institutional learning outcomes. In institutional learning outcomes tracking studies, my strategies appear to be effectively tied to learning outcome achievements, and on more subjective measures, such as student evaluations, students indicate engagement in my courses. Thus, active learning can be an effective model and strategy for fully online courses, so long as the online tools and exercises are appropriately constructed and used, and instructors are highly engaged with monitoring students' use of these tools, and adapts to changing technologies and needs. In these ways, fully online courses can provide active and powerfully engaging learning experiences.

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