

Instructional Strategies for Online Courses



Effective online instruction depends on learning experiences appropriately designed and facilitated by knowledgeable educators. Because learners have different [learning styles](#) or a combination of styles, online educators should design activities that address their modes of learning in order to provide significant experience for each class participant. In designing online courses, this can best be accomplished by utilizing multiple instructional strategies. Teaching models exist which apply to traditional higher education learning environment and when designing courses for the online environment, these strategies should be adapted to the new environment.

ONLINE COURSES AND MULTIPLE INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Traditionally, in a teacher-centered classroom, instructors control their environment because they have a monopoly on information. In an online course, with instant access to vast resources of data and information students are no longer totally dependent on faculty for knowledge. As faculty are beginning to teach online, learning is becoming more collaborative, contextual and active. Educators must first design their curriculum and objectives and then consider how the online environment can best serve the instructional objectives and activities of that curriculum. This requires changes in pedagogy, with instructors taking the role of facilitators providing information while guiding students toward solutions. In order for online learning to be successful, teachers and learners must take on new roles in the teaching-learning relationship, and faculty must be willing to relinquish control of learning to the students.

Online learning environments permit a full range of interactive methodologies, and as instructors have found that adapting their courses to online models, they are paying more attention to the instructional design of their courses. As a result, the quality, quantity, and patterns of communication students practice during learning improved.

Of the many instructional strategies available for use in the online learning environment, most have not been developed specifically for online instruction, but are currently used in traditional classrooms, and can be successfully adapted for facilitating online learning. Educators should choose instructional strategies that are effective for accomplishing a particular educational objective. From this perspective, instructional strategies are tools available to educators for designing and facilitate learning. Below are ten instructional strategies which have been effectively used in the traditional classroom and can likewise be used in the online learning environment.

Learning Contracts	Small Group Work
Discussion	Project
Lecture	Collaborative Learning
Self-Directed Learning	Case Study
Mentorship	Forum

LEARNING CONTRACTS

Learning contracts connect educational needs to individual student needs and are useful when there is diverse learner needs and interests in a class. A learning contract is a formal agreement written by a learner which outlines what will be learned, how the learning will be accomplished, the period of time involved, and the specific evaluation criteria to be used in judging the completion of the learning. Learning contracts help the educator and learner share the responsibility for learning.

Contract learning can bring about many practical benefits, including deeper involvement of the learner in the learning activities which they themselves have been involved in planning. Once a learner passes through the initial phase of confusion and anxiety associated with developing a contract, he/she will get excited about carrying out their own plans. Another benefit of utilizing contract learning is an increase of accountability, since the learning contract provides more functional and validated evidence of the learning outcomes. The contract also provides a mechanism for the learner to receive continuous feedback regarding progress toward accomplishing learning objectives.

Learning contracts can be extremely effective in the online environment. Because physically meeting with the class to discuss learning goals, objectives, and expectations is not possible online, instructors must be very clear and concise in what is expected from the learner. Likewise, the learner must also be clear about what he/she expects from the instructor and the course. A learning contract can facilitate negotiation and clarify learning goals and outcomes. Sample learning contracts can be placed on a web page for the student to use as examples and students can be encouraged to brainstorm ideas for learning contracts with their online peers as well as negotiate the final contract with the instructor through utilizing email or online conferencing.



LECTURE

The lecture is one of the most frequently used instructional methods in adult education. It assumes the educator to be the expert and is an efficient way of disseminating information. Most educators agree that the purpose of lectures is to lay foundations as the student works through the subject, and good lecturers know their students and develop their lectures according to the students' needs. Most importantly, lectures are most effective when used in combination with other instructional strategies.

Online lectures can be presented in a variety of ways. Lecture notes can be placed on a web page for the learner to review. Notes can be put together in a packet and either downloaded from the Internet or sent via snail mail. Lectures can also be presented via audio or video over the Internet. Also, links to related resources and other sites can be embedded in online lectures. Online lectures are likely to be shorter and more to the point than lectures in live classrooms which often extend far beyond the attention span of the audience. Short lectures provide enough information to serve as a basis for further reading, research, or other learning activities. An

obvious advantage of online lectures is that they are readily available for students to revisit again and again needed.



DISCUSSION

Discussion is the instructional strategy most favored by adult learners because it is interactive and encourages active, participatory learning. The discussion format encourages learners to analyze alternative ways of thinking and acting and assists learners in exploring their own experiences so they can become better critical thinkers. The discussion is often the heart of an online course.

The Internet offers several modes for discussion including mailing lists (listservs) which focus on particular and online conferencing programs. Both of these options utilize asynchronous communication. Synchronous (real-time) communication can be offered by utilizing chat rooms or text-based virtual reality environments, better known as Multi-user Domains (MUDs) or Multi-user Object Oriented Environments (MOOs).



SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Self-directed learning is learning initiated and directed by the learner and can include self-paced, independent and individualized learning as well as self-instruction. Whatever terminology is used, self-directed learning places the responsibility for learning directly on the learner. Learners who take the initiative in learning and are proactive learners learn more and better than passive learners (reactive learners). Proactive learners enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation. They also tend to retain and make use of what they learn better and longer than reactive learners. The independent learner is one who is more involved and active within the learning process.

Online learning supports the self-directed learner in pursuing individualized, self-paced learning activities. The learner, working at a computer at a convenient time and pace, is able to search and utilize the vast resources on the Internet to research nearly any topic imaginable. Students can visit libraries, museums and various institutions world-wide, talk to professionals, access recent research, and read newspapers and peer reviewed scholarly journals online. Students can write collaboratively with peers and even publish written and multimedia products on web pages.



MENTORSHIP

The aim of mentorship is to promote learner development drawing out and giving form to what the student already knows. A mentor serves as a guide rather than a provider of knowledge and serves the function of introducing students to the new world, interpreting it for them, and helping them to learn what they need to do to function in it. Mentors in education teach by interpreting the environment and modeling expected behavior. They also support, challenge, and provide vision for their students.

A major benefit to online mentorship is the opportunity for frequent, convenient communication between mentor and student. Weekly or even daily journals and communications can be sent between mentor and student via email, providing an ongoing "dialogue" which supports the development of the mentor relationship and offers

numerous opportunities for timely feedback on student questions, concerns and issues.



SMALL GROUP WORK

In small groups learners can discuss content, share ideas, and solve problems. They present their own ideas well as consider ideas put forth by others. In this way, they can be exposed to a variety of viewpoints on a subject. There are many small group formats that encourage and provide opportunities for interaction:

The discussion group allows learners to reflect on a subject under discussion and present their views. Discussion within the small group is often on high intellectual levels - specifically analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Guided design encourages interaction in small groups. Here the focus is on developing learners' decision-making skills as well as on teaching specific concepts and principles. Participants work to solve open-ended problems which require outside class work to gather information. This format encourages learners to think logically, communicate ideas, and apply steps in a decision-making process. Learners are also required to apply the information they have learned, exchange ideas, and reflect on suggested solutions. The instructor's role is to act as a consultant to the groups.

Role playing is another format available for use with small groups and involves recreating a situation relating to a real-world problem in which participants act out various roles. This promotes an understanding of other perspectives and their attitudes as well as the procedures that might be used for diagnosing and solving problems. Role playing can be used to simulate real-life group work situations and can help learners gain a fuller understanding of a problem or situation.

Games requiring two or more groups to compete while attempting to meet a set of objectives is another form of small group learning. The game follows a set of rules and procedures and information is provided which requires decision making. Most instructional games reflect typical real-life situations. The rules, procedures, and objectives of the game should be clear and concise.

Online learning environments offer several distinct benefits for small group work. First, they allow small groups to work independently while still having access to the instructor. In some cases where it is difficult for all members of an online class to meet synchronously, small groups can be organized according to their time zones, making it possible to find a convenient time to meet synchronously. Larger groups can benefit by communicating asynchronously via conferencing programs. A second benefit of online environments for group work is that they equalize control among participants. Factors such as geography, gender, or disabilities do not disadvantage learners in this environment. Finally, the instructor is able to respond directly to questions and needs of participants within their groups without taking the time of other groups.



PROJECT

Online projects give students an opportunity to pursue their special interests and can be done individually or within groups. Projects also provide students with practical experience and a sense of accomplishment. Using projects in a learning activity makes the learning more relevant to the learners. Projects can be shared with others in the class and critiqued. Many times an individual project is only critiqued by the facilitator, but by sharing individual projects with other participants, the learner has the opportunity to obtain more diverse viewpoints and feedback.

Many of the instructional strategies discussed above can be considered group projects. Group projects can include simulations, role playing, case studies, problem solving exercises, group collaborative work, debates, small group discussion, and brainstorming. As with individual projects, participants in group projects should receive peer feedback to expose them to diverse viewpoints. With independent and group projects learners pursue specific interests, write or create for an audience, and publish or present their findings and conclusions via the Internet. The Internet provides the potential of receiving feedback from experts or interested peers outside the classroom by accessing the project online.



COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative learning is the process of getting two or more students to work together to learn. Students work in small groups composed of participants with differing ability levels and using a variety of learning activities to master material initially developed by an instructor, or construct knowledge on substantive issues. Each member of the team is responsible for learning what is taught and for helping teammates learn.

Collaborative learning methods are now used in over a third of higher education courses, and their use has increased in the past six years more than any other learning method, according to a recent survey conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. Employers want workers with collaborative skills and are looking for graduates of educational programs that teach these skills. Collaborative learning can be more effective than interpersonal competitive and individualistic efforts in promoting cognitive development, self-esteem, and positive student-student relationships.

Online learning models are natural environments for collaborative learning, but they are not collaborative learning environments by definition. Learners may interact with other participants without collaborating, for example receiving on-line tutorial help. Learning activities have to be specifically and somewhat carefully designed to be effective.



CASE STUDY

The case study is a teaching strategy which requires learners to draw upon their past experiences, is participatory, and has action components which are links to future experience. The key to a successful case study is the selection of an appropriate problem situation which is relevant both to the interests and experience level of learners and to the concepts being taught. The case report should include facts regarding the problem, the environmental context, and the characters of the people involved in the case. It should be factual, but also include the opinions and views of the people involved. Learners should have access to the problem solution, but not until they have reached their own conclusions and can then compare their results with the actual decision taken to resolve the problem.

The case analysis can be carried out with the learners working independently or in groups. One advantage of using the case method is that it emphasizes practical thinking and it assists learners in identifying principles by examining the facts of the case and then applying those principles to new situations. Case analysis is equally effective when used [in combination with other instructional strategies](#).

In the online environment case studies can be presented on web pages and discussed in conferencing groups. Cases can be developed by class groups as collaborative projects. In addition, the vast resources of the Internet can be tapped by students and educators to contribute data, information and expert advice to case development and analysis.



FORUM

The forum is an open discussion carried on by one or more resource people and an entire group. The moderator guides the discussion and the audience raises and discusses issues, makes comments, offers information, or asks questions of the resource person(s) and each other. There are two variations of the forum: the panel and the symposium.

The **panel** is usually a group of three to six people who sit in the presence of an audience and have a purposeful conversation on a topic in which they have specialized knowledge. Guided by a moderator, the panel is informal in nature, but allows for no audience participation. The **symposium** is a series of presentations given by two to three people on different aspects of the same theme or closely related themes. Although the symposium is formal in nature, questions from the audience are encouraged following the presentations. An obvious benefit of the symposium is that it gives learners exposure to a variety of experts' viewpoints and offers an opportunity for the audience to ask questions.

Because the online environment facilitates group communication, it is ideal for the types of information exchange typical in forums. In fact, the forum can be more convenient and effective in the online environment than in a traditional classroom because speakers, experts and moderators can participate without having to travel or be available at a particular time. Both synchronous and asynchronous communication can be utilized to support online learning forums.



CONCLUSION

The online learning environment allows educators and students to exchange ideas and information, work together on projects, around the clock, from anywhere in the world, using multiple communication modes. Given the advantages and resources of this rich learning environment, how can multiple instructional strategies best be utilized for online learning? Just as in the traditional classroom, instructional strategies are most effective when employed specifically to meet particular learning goals and objectives. Effective course design can begin with asking and answering the key question: what are the major learning goals and objectives for this course? Once these goals and objectives have been identified and clearly articulated, the question of which learning strategies, activities, and experiences to employ can be addressed.

Online learning can employ any of the strategies discussed here. Much of the power of learning via the Internet lies in its capacity to support multiple modes of communication including any combination of student-student, student-faculty, faculty-student, faculty-faculty, student-others, others-students, etc. Taking into account the varied learning styles of learners and providing opportunities for self-directed and collaborative learning, educators can facilitate powerful, effective courses geared to achieve specific learning goals and outcomes using the vast resources and capacities of online learning.

The online learning environment is, after all, just another learning environment, in some ways similar to and in some ways different from more traditional environments such as conventional classrooms, seminar rooms, and computer labs. When we move our class onto the Internet, we should plan for and make the best use of the online environment. The various instructional strategies we use to meet the goals and objectives of our courses are to be similar in each environment. However, the ways in which we utilize the strategies will differ as we make the best use of the characteristics and capacities of each environment.



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