

CSI: An Engaging Online Classroom Introduction Activity

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Abstract

All course activities should be aimed at moving students towards the learning outcomes, including class introductions. This article provides detailed instructions for implementing an online Class Session Introductions (CSI) activity that immediately engages students with their peers, the content and the instructor. The activity may be useful to instructors when creating sub-groups or peer teams and differentiating learning activities in future course activities and assignments. Additionally, the article focuses on how the CSI activity might be used to assess students' prior content knowledge, align students' expectations with course outcomes and identify students' learning styles and dominant intelligence; all of which can be used to enhance the e-learning experience for students. Examples and illustrations are also included.

Keywords: Student engagement, distance education, online teaching, student involvement, instructional design.

For many higher education students and faculty, attending the first class session can be an exciting and exhilarating, yet uncomfortable experience. Dorn (1987) refers to the first class session of the term as an "encounter among strangers" (p. 103). Students wonder if anyone they know is also taking the course. They worry about the instructor's expectations and personality. They may be concerned about their preparedness for the assignments and exams. Such anxiety in face-to-face courses is often reduced during introductions, where each student takes a few moments to share information such as his or her name, hometown and college major with the instructor and their classmates. However, 32 percent of all higher education students enroll in at least one online course in their academic careers (Allen & Seaman, 2013), they may experience similar "first day of class" anxiety, as well. So, what can we, as instructors, do when face-to-face introductions are out of the questions?

Research (Dixson, 2010; Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Tofade, Elsner, & Haines, 2013) supports that strategies used to welcome students to the online course environment may go well beyond simply establishing a level of comfort and influence students' levels of engagement in all aspects of the class. The Class Session Introductions (CSI) activity includes a series of divergent questions that allow students to share their initial thoughts

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about the course. Student responses are used to introduce themselves, while providing information that may be used to create differentiated instructional materials, assignments and assessments. The activity also helps to further ensure that diversity and privacy parameters of various ethnic groups are protected. Another component of the CSI activity relates to helping students develop an awareness of their own learning styles and those of their classmates.

This article provides detailed instructions for implementing the CSI activity in an online course. It focuses on how the CSI activity might be used as a class introduction activity to assess students' prior content knowledge, align students' expectations with course outcomes and identify students' learning styles; all of which can be used to enhance the e-learning experience for students.

CSI Design Framework

In face-to-face classrooms, students share information about one another through the traditional introduction icebreakers, informal conversations and nonverbal cues (Beaduouin-Lafon, 1994). In addition to learning factual information about one another, students use the exchanges to infer information about disposition and commitment (Spring & Vathanophas, 2003) and may also use the introductions to set a foundation for future class interactions between themselves, as learners. Although these specific types of interactions are often not feasible in online asynchronous courses, there are alternative methods that can be used to accomplish the same goals.

The CSI activity requires students to reflect and then respond to a series of open-ended questions about their thoughts and perceptions regarding the course. Their responses are shared with their classmates through an online discussion board forum. The activity is an example of Active Learning, defined as "instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2). Active learning plays a key role in the theory of student involvement (Astin, 1999), which posits that the level of student interaction with their peers is an important factor in their success in college.

In addition, the CSI activity provides all class members with the same information about each student. This awareness of their classmates contributes to Group Awareness, which Jongsawat and Premchaiswadi broadly defined as "consciousness and information about various aspects of the group and its members" (2014, p. 819). CSI activity responses provide the instructor with specific learner characteristics that may later be used in the formation of online learning communities or determine the membership of small groups within the course.

CSI Activity Implementation

The CSI activity immediately engages and focuses students on their goals and expectations from the course by using the Graffiti Needs Assessment questioning strategy (Goza, 1993) as a template. The CSI activity is a series of divergent questions based upon the

Concerns-Based Adoption model (Hord, 1987) and includes questions framed around Fuller's (1969) Self-Concern, Task and Impact inquiries. The CSI activity seeks to ignite student curiosity regarding course content that may not be interesting to them. Furthermore, CSI questions seek to encourage students to reflect upon their thoughts about the course outcomes and to stimulate dialog with their classmates in the feedback segment of the activity (Tofade et al., 2013). Below, each question type is explained, in turn.

CSI Self-Concern Questions

While new students may experience anxiety, self-concern question attempts to redirect students to the learning outcomes for the course. The question may require them to revisit the course syllabus and review each stated outcome to reflect upon their level of related interest. Through this exploration, students may find their 'what's-in-it-for-me' resolution. An example of a CSI Self-Concern question is: Which of the course's learning outcomes are of most interest to you and why?

CSI Task Questions

CSI Task questions prompt students to reflect upon previous personal and educational experiences to determine what preparation they may have had related to the course content. They provide an opportunity for students to assess their own related knowledge and skills. This self-assessment provides information for the instructor and their classmates related to their levels of prior knowledge. CSI Task question responses can also provide evidence of gaps in students' prior knowledge related to the content. Instructors may use Task question responses to develop course materials to accommodate specific levels of knowledge and/or skills. For example, students with limited capabilities may require supplemental materials and resources. Or, for those students with broader backgrounds may be further challenged with expanded instructional opportunities. An example of a CSI Task question is: What preparation have you had as a foundation for this course?

CSI Impact Questions

CSI Impact questions prompt students to envision how the new knowledge and experiences gained in the course might influence their lives. Reflective responses provide an opportunity for students to identify personal benefits from the course. Students may begin to think of things they will be able to know or be able to do that are presently not possible. Identifying how the new knowledge or skill may positively impact their world may generate excitement and intrinsic motivation for participating in future course activities. An example of a CSI Impact question: What influence do you believe this course will have on your future?

CSI LS/MI Inquiry

The CSI LS/MI Inquiry relates to learning styles and multiple intelligence assessments. Students complete a web-based assessment to provide them with information regarding their dominate learning modality and/or intelligence. Instructors may be able to use this

information to fine-tune the course to address specific learner profiles. When combined with learning taxonomies, information from a multiple intelligence assessment helps the instructor to create an exciting and engaging course (Kuhn, 2008). Course assignments and activities that are tailored to specific learning modalities have a positive impact on student success in college classrooms (McFarlane, 2011; Narayanan, 2011; Zajac, 2009) an advantage that can logically be extended to the online environment. A listing of related web-based assessments can be found in the Supplemental Materials section at the end of the article.

CSI Discussion Board Forum

Though CSI activities can be presented in many ways and via a variety of online platforms, the CSI activity example, that is presented here, is a discussion board forum within the Blackboard Learning Management System, version 9.1. Research (Brown, 2014; Dalelio, 2013; Davies & Graff, 2005) indicates that learners use higher order thinking skills in online discussion board activities, and that this type of thinking ultimately impacts course achievement in positive ways. Learning environments that optimize opportunities for students to interact with their peers, the instructor and the content, such as discussion boards, provide excellent platforms for student engagement.

To begin, instructors create a new discussion board forum and include the instructions, directions and model responses in the narrative. Putting all of the pertinent information in one, central location helps students, particularly those who are new to online courses, access support resources, including handouts, videos, examples and illustrations, in close proximity to where they may be needed. Next, students enter their responses as New Threads, each branching off from the forum. Then, to further encourage peer-to-peer interaction, students are required to review and share reactions to peer entries as Reply postings in the Discussion Forum. This aspect of the CSI activity provides structure as described for social interaction, which is foundational to collaborative learning in online courses (Curtis & Lawson, 2001).

The specific format of the CSI activity can vary widely. In this example, students are asked to create electronic trading cards to share CSI responses. The National Council for Teachers of English free Web 2.0 tool can be used for this purpose (http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/trading_cards_2/). The cards are created online and downloaded as PDF files. Then, students upload and post their cards as their discussion board new thread entry. As an added bonus, monitoring how difficult different students find this task can give the instructor a glimpse into the technical skills of students within the online course.

Examples and Illustrations

Examples of Detailed instructions (Figure 1), illustrations and model responses (Figure 2) are critical at this stage of the online course and will help students complete the CSI activity successfully. Video and written instructions from web-based resources can be hyperlinked to open in new windows. They can provide illustrations for such tasks as

CSI Assignment Directions:

In order for us to learn more about each other, please complete the following Course Session Introduction (CSI) activity. Click to view a model response: **Jamie Smith's Trading Card**

1. Draft responses to the following CSI questions:
 - *CSI Self-Concern Question 1:* Which of the course's learning outcomes are of most interest to you and why?
 - *CSI Task Question 2:* What preparation have you had as a foundation for this course?
 - *CSI Impact Question 3:* What influence do you believe this course will have on your future?
 - *CSI LS/MI Inquiry:* Please click **here**ⁱ to take the Multiple Intelligence Assessment. It will open in a new browser window. Then, share your strengths and explain why you agree or disagree and share examples or illustrations.
2. Click to view the "how to" create a **Trading Card video**ⁱⁱ.
3. Create a Trading Card to contain your responses to the CSI questions. The url is: **http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/trading_cards_2/**
4. Save the Trading Card (AS A PDF) to your computer.
5. Upload your TRADING CARD as a NEW THREAD in the related CSI discussion board forum. Click **here** for instruction on creating a new thread.
6. Entitle the thread:

YOUR LAST NAME: Trading Card
Example - STEPHENS: Trading Card
For other examples of how electronic TRADING CARDS can be used in teaching, click **here**ⁱⁱⁱ and **here**^{iv}.
7. Share your reactions to at least four (4) of your classmates' Trading Cards. There are no parameters. Please simply post as a REPLY.

***Bolded words and phrases indicate hyperlinks provided for students to tutorials, examples and other online activities.**

Figure 1. Instructions for students to complete the CSI Activity including the trading cards component. The Supplemental Materials section contains the URL locations, as indicated with footnote notations above, of all the web resources listed.

creating a new thread and access to web-based resources such as the multiple intelligence assessment or the trading card website.

Students benefit from model responses or illustrations (Figure 2) that depict a product

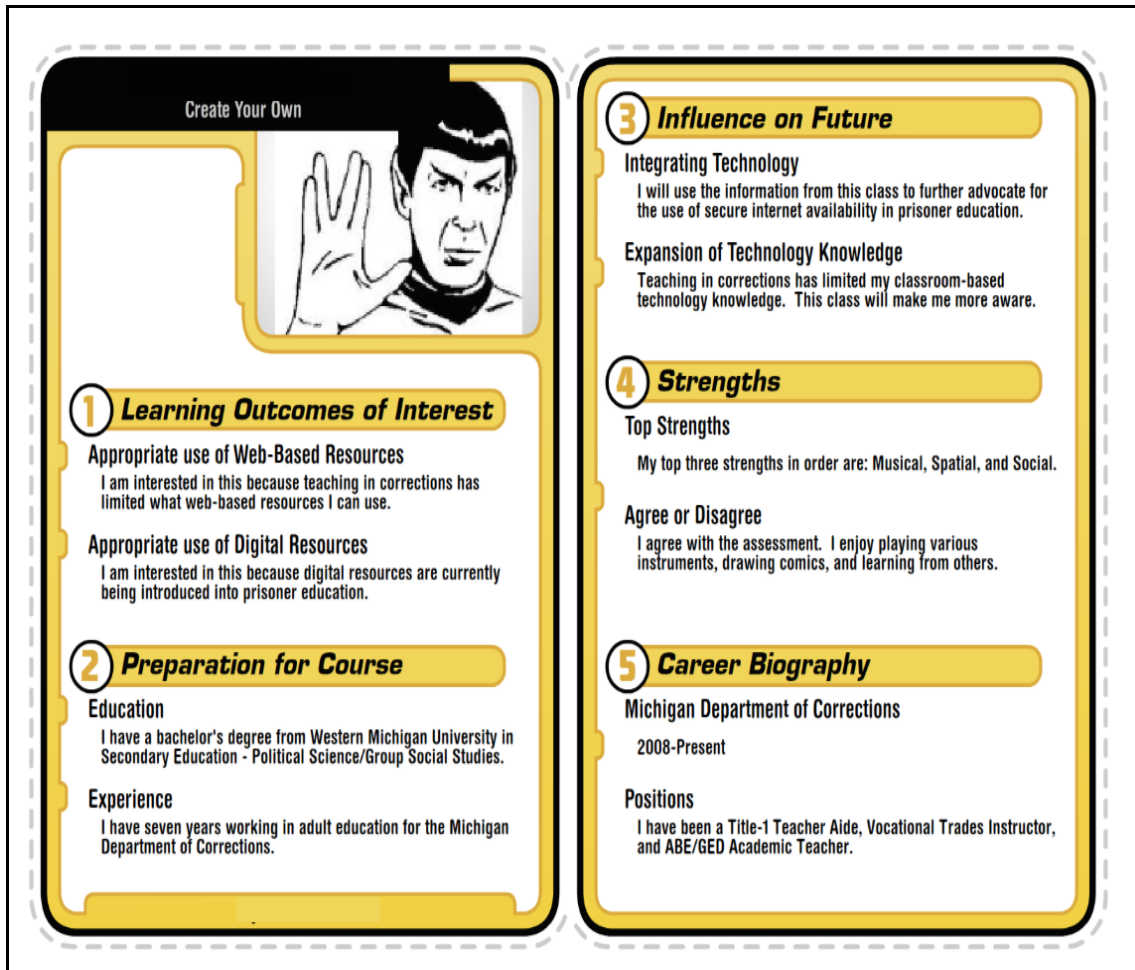


Figure 2. This trading card is an exemplar illustration of what students might produce in the CSI activity.

that satisfies the instructor's expectations. Such examples provide a visual roadmap for students to follow. If you have done this activity before, you can include an exemplar model from a previous student (with permission, of course). If not, you can create one, yourself. In this response, the student included an optional response category, Career Biography, which generated much interest from his classmates. And, he chose to use an avatar instead of sharing a photo of himself. Avatars can be used in the trading card to ensure privacy. As expected (Jahng, 2012; Jahng, Nielsen, & Chan, 2010), the reactions posted by their peers for this assignment are most often positive (see Figure 3 for example student responses to the example in Figure 2).

To further increase peer-to-peer engagement, the instructor might create a Scavenger hunt activity. A quiz containing clues from the CSI responses can be created and given to the online class. Then, students would search the CSI response postings or trading cards to match the clue and student. This segment of the assignment would help ensure all students are 'introduced'.

- Let me just start by saying, great picture! Also, I think it's great that you are working in adult education for the Department of Corrections. Teaching adults who truly want to make a change is an incredible service to give. If this department is supposed to be used to rehabilitate, then it's good to know that they are actually given the chance to do that. Good luck this semester!
- Hello Peter! We have 2/3 strengths in common (music and social). With your previous work experience, I am looking forward to hearing your thoughts on the material in this course. I am just starting my classroom experience so I've got a ways to go and always appreciate learning from others.
- I think that is amazing that you teach in the department of corrections! I can imagine it takes a lot of patience and determination! It is important that there are people willing to show the inmates that they are still worth someone taking their time to teach them.
- Hi there! What an interesting area of work experience that you have! That's definitely something I hope to hear more about over the course of this semester. I think that you can give our PLC a viewpoint that I know I personally am interested to learn more about. I also attended WMU for a while. I lived in Valley I, and I absolutely loved it there! Nice getting to know you!
- Hi Peter :-). I used to be a Title 1 Tutor for kindergarten and 1st grade students. I loved that job! Unfortunately the funding was cut :-(. Your current job teaching in corrections sounds very interesting. I look forward to hearing more about it throughout this class.
- Hi Peter. Great card. I'm always interested in finding out what draws people to their line of work - what interested you in teaching in the Department of Corrections? I hadn't thought about the obstacles in teaching in that situation, but now can imagine they must be numerous.

Figure 3. Actual student discussion board postings as reactions to the responses posted by the creator of the illustration in Figure 2.

Conclusion

Every online course activity should be geared towards supporting students to reach course outcomes, including class introductions. As an introductory assignment, student success on the CSI activity may help establish a foundation for success in other course activities. By incorporating the CSI activity among the initial assignments, online students may be better prepared for future course activities that requires interaction between them and their peers, the instructor and the content. CSI response information may be useful to the instructor to create sub-groups or peer teams and to differentiate learning activities in upcoming course activities and assignments. Finally, there may be no need for students to be awarded credit, because the CSI activity is similar to student introductions or icebreakers conducted in face-to-face classes, which are rarely graded assignments.

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Supplemental Materials

ⁱ Various web-based learning styles and multiple intelligence assessments -

- <http://www.edutopia.org/multiple-intelligences-assessment>
- <http://www.personal.psu.edu/bxb11/LSI/LSI.htm>
- <https://www.engr.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/ilsweb.html>
- http://www.bgfl.org/bgfl/custom/resources_fpf/client_fpf/ks3/ict/multiple_int/questions/choose_language.cfm
- http://www.queendom.com/tests/access_page/index.htm?idRegTest=3104

ⁱⁱ Creating a Trading Card Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ef0X5WiDszQ>

ⁱⁱⁱ An example of the benefits of the trading card activity: <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/activities-projects/create-trading-cards-favorite-30171.html>

^{iv} An example of the benefits of the trading card activity: <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/trading-card-creator-30056.html> that satisfies the instructor's expectations. Such examples provide a visual roadmap for students to follow. If you have done this activity before, you can include an exemplar model from a previous student (with permission, of course). If not, you can create one,