

# FINDING THE BALANCE: CREATING MEANINGFUL ASSIGNMENTS WITHOUT OVERWHELMING INSTRUCTIONAL WORKLOAD

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## ABSTRACT

*Online instructors are tasked with creating meaningful learning assignments, but they may struggle with balancing their teaching workloads. This article includes five strategies for creating assignments and activities that promote learning without overwhelming instructional workload, including anticipating student questions when writing assignments, creating reusable formative assessments, scaffolding assignments, creating choices for summative assessments, and encouraging student collaboration. These strategies draw from a constructivist learning paradigm while employing the concepts of interactivity, scaffolding, and collaboration.*

*Keywords: constructivism, interaction, scaffolding, faculty workload*

## INTRODUCTION

Educating students online can be a challenging task. Instructors are expected to facilitate their students' learning, provide timely feedback and communication, and expertly design their courses for maximum student engagement. Instructors seek to provide meaningful assignments while serving to administer their courses and to interact with students in a significant way. According to a recent study of Australian educators, most academics work over 50 hours per week (Kenny & Fluck, 2017). It is no wonder that faculty members, as members of the helping profession who interact with people frequently, are prime candidates to experience burnout (Minter, 2009). Online educators face additional pressures, as a recent study found that time spent in preparing online courses is longer than that spent preparing face-to-face courses (Kenny & Fluck, 2017). While it is important to provide meaningful learning opportunities, instructors need strategies for balancing their workloads at the same time. Five strategies for creating assignments and activities that promote learning without

overwhelming instructional workload are outlined below. These strategies include:

1. anticipating student questions when writing assignments;
  2. creating reusable formative assessments;
  3. scaffolding assignments;
  4. creating choices for summative assessments;
- and
5. encouraging student collaboration.

These strategies for creating assignments draw from a constructivist learning paradigm while employing the concepts of interactivity, scaffolding, and collaboration.

## BACKGROUND

Recent research in educational theory has drawn heavily from a constructivist approach. From this perspective, learning is an active practice in which learners construct their own knowledge. This learner-centered approach seeks to engage the learner's mind and provides opportunities for the learner to construct meaning (Hein, 1991; Smit, de Brabander, & Martens 2014). The suggestions that follow are based on an extensive review of

research on learner-centered instruction in the online classroom. Numerous peer-reviewed journal articles and books on e-learning were reviewed and three main principles of course design emerged: scaffolding, interactivity, and collaboration.

### *Scaffolding*

Scaffolding, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), is an instructional method in which instructors provide support to learners to help eliminate barriers to learning and gradually remove support as students become more self-sufficient. According to Young (1993), scaffolding is a process of requiring learners to complete specific steps in order to move forward in the learning design. Increased support is provided by a mentor at the beginning of the learning process and constraints are removed as a learner moves toward the learning goal. Thomas and Sondergeld (2015) liken scaffolding in the classroom to learning to ride a bike with training wheels. The supports are temporary and are gradually taken away as students become more competent in their skills.

Scaffolding can be useful in helping create effective and efficient assignments in the online environment. Dabbagh (2003) suggests that in order to be effective, scaffolding must meet the needs of the learner without under- or overwhelming him/her. Recently, Hsiao, Mikolaj, and Shih (2017) found that online and hybrid course learners found scaffolding to be a useful instructional technique for learning. Additionally, Croxton (2014) found that student interaction with instructors throughout online courses, including through the process of scaffolding, can be beneficial in helping students to maintain persistence. Scaffolding permits online educators to build in more support for assignments at the beginning of a course and then gradually remove constraints. This allows students to engage in more self-guided learning as they progress through the course. This can create more competence in skills and overall satisfaction with online courses.

### *Interactivity*

In addition to scaffolding, interaction in online learning supports a constructivist learning paradigm. Constructivism suggests that knowledge is created through interaction and negotiation with others. Each learner brings his/her unique experiences and background to online learning

and learners can construct knowledge from interacting with each other and with the content (Davidson-Shivers & Rasmussen, 2006; Joyner, Fuller, Holzweiss, Henderson, & Young, 2014). Interaction is central to creating meaning in online learning. Interaction has been defined by scholars in several different ways. Most simply, Hillman, Willis, & Gunawardena (1994) define interaction as “engagement in learning” (as cited in Northrup, 2002, p. 219). Rhode (2009) defines interaction as “active intercourse with either concepts or agents” (p. 1). According to Davidson-Shivers and Rasmussen (2006), interaction refers to “the transaction(s) between and among participants in the learning communities and with the [web-based instruction]” (p. 234). These authors suggest that there are four primary modes in which these interactions take place in online learning: student to student, student to instructor, student to content, and student to management system. Through various types of activities, such as group projects, discussions, and peer feedback, students can interact with each other through online learning. Instructors can interact with students through the use of journals, discussion boards, and instant messaging/chats (Davidson-Shivers & Rasmussen, 2006). The third mode, student to content, is related to what Allen (2016) calls instructional interactivity, which he defines as “interaction that actively stimulates the learner’s mind to do things that improve the ability and readiness to perform effectively” (p. 237). In Allen’s terms, instructional interactivity requires both “thinking” and “doing” to improve skills and performance. In the last mode, student to management system, students can use the LMS to track items such as course grades, course progress, and announcements (Davidson-Shivers & Rasmussen, 2006). These elements were summed up by Thurmond and Wambach (2004) in their definition of interaction, which is “the learner’s engagement with the course content, other learners, the instructor, and the technological medium used in the course. True interactions . . . [result] in a reciprocal exchange of information” (p. 4). Interaction facilitates engagement within online learning and helps to provide meaningful learning opportunities.

Interactivity has been identified as a key component of successful online courses by several different studies. According to Swan (2002), there

is a strong correlation between instructor-student interaction and student satisfaction with a course. Swan found that interaction between students and between instructors and students was strongly correlated with student satisfaction with the course. A study by Ngoyi, Mpanga, and Ngoyi (2014) supported these findings and identified instructor-student interaction to be of primary value to online students. Additionally, O'Rourke, Main, and Cooper (2014) found that participants in a study of traditional lectures versus online interactive lectures were very enthusiastic about the ability to engage with the lectures and the presentation of those lectures in an interactive format. The research supports the notion that interactivity is an important part of facilitating learning in online and traditional courses.

### *Collaboration*

Collaboration is another useful concept for promoting active learning in online courses. Collaboration moves beyond interaction and emphasizes learners working together to accomplish a shared goal or solve a problem. Garrison (2006) outlines several online collaboration principles and describes their purpose as “creat[ing] a community of inquiry where students are fully engaged in collaboratively constructing meaningful and worthwhile knowledge” (p. 25). In this model students support each other and serve in more egalitarian roles than a traditional classroom. Garrison suggests an emphasis on problem-based scenarios or scenarios that are driven by instructional questions. Clark and Mayer (2008) describe computer-supported collaborative learning as “collaborative engagements among teams of two to five members using synchronous and/or asynchronous tool facilities in ways that support an instructional goal, such as to produce a joint product, resolve a case study, or complete an instructional worksheet” (p. 262). Collaboration provides an opportunity for students to come together to accomplish an instructional goal together.

Collaboration supports several pedagogical principles. As has been discussed previously, constructivist approaches to learning emphasize creating shared meaning and learning from social negotiation. Additionally, collaboration supports a learning-centered model, as opposed to an instructor-led model (Davidson-Shivers and

Rasmussen, 2006). Garrison (2006) suggests that a group-centered interaction pattern in an online environment may help students to build on each other's thoughts and reflect on the material, as opposed to a traditional classroom where students must take turns speaking and may not have adequate time to reflect. This can help in building community in a way that is unique to the online environment.

Additionally, Stephens and Roberts (2017) emphasize that collaboration in an online course reflects many workplaces today in which colleagues must work together across time and space. The authors acknowledge the challenges presented by collaboration in the online classroom, but nonetheless they see its value in engaging students in the online classroom and preparing them for today's workplace. These unique qualities of online collaboration can provide deep learning experiences for students.

### **STRATEGIES FOR CREATING ASSIGNMENTS**

Incorporating scaffolding, interactivity, and collaboration can all be ways to create meaningful learning experiences for students. However, attempting to incorporate all of these methods into assignments can also create potential for overwhelming instructional workload. Below are strategies that can be employed to create assignments that incorporate scaffolding, interactivity, and collaboration to create meaningful assignments without creating excess work for instructors.

#### *Anticipate Student Questions*

One of the most important ways that an instructor can create effective assignments is through the use of clear instructions. The Consortium for the Study of Writing in College (2009) provides three criteria for creating clear instructions, including providing students with information on what exactly what the instructor wants the learners to do, what the instructor wants the students to learn, and clear criteria that will be used for assessment. Instructors can follow these guidelines to create clear expectations for their students and hopefully anticipate and eliminate questions by addressing questions before they are asked. By creating clear instructions and guidelines, instructors provide the scaffolding for students to be successful in the course.

Many LMSs include a rubric feature, which can

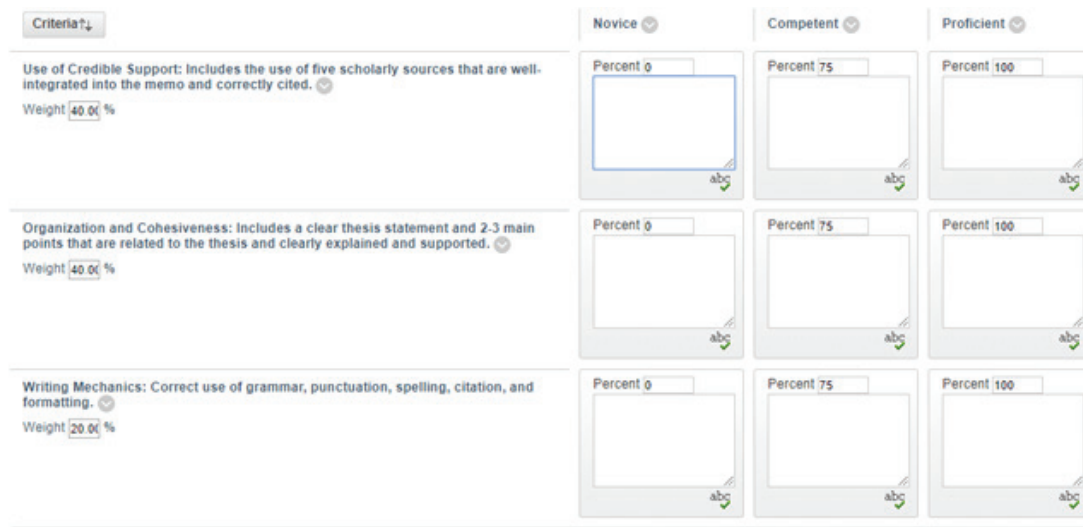


Figure 1. Reusable Rubric within the Blackboard LMS

be used to show students how they will be graded, but it will also expedite the grading process and can be reused in future classes. According to Andrade (2000), rubrics are useful for clearly explaining expectations, providing feedback on students' strengths and weaknesses, and encouraging student self-assessment, which can increase learning. While the use of rubrics does not eliminate all questions, it does give students a clear sense of what is expected and how they will be graded. Andrade (2005) reminds instructors that in order to be effective, rubrics must align with course goals and must also be accompanied with instruction and an explanation of how the rubric will be used to grade assignments. Rubrics can help the instructor manage his/her workload by providing documentation of expectations up front, in hopes of minimizing email correspondence about assignment expectations. This is particularly important for online educators because, according to Straumsheim (2014), many instructors and students in higher education are inundated with email, which can be problematic in an online environment. Figure 1 provides an example of a reusable rubric that can be set up in the Blackboard LMS. This rubric can guide students as they work on assignments and can be easily integrated into grading and feedback to streamline the grading process for instructors.

In order to help anticipate questions, Dabbagh (2003) suggests providing a forum for students to ask questions about assignments in an area that is published for the whole class to review. In an online class, an obvious place to do this would be in a dedicated discussion forum, although blogs or social media sites might be alternate locations for these questions. This method can be particularly effective in reaching many students who may have the same questions. It also allows the instructor an opportunity to publicly answer a question once without having to answer the same question several times over email, which will reduce instructor workload. As an alternative, an instructor could also provide a list of frequently asked questions about each assignment, which could prove to be useful for students who may have questions about an assignment without overwhelming those students who do not share those questions. Additionally, this list of frequently asked questions could be used across sections and semesters, which would limit the amount of time that instructors would need to devote to answering questions that many students may have about a particular assignment. In a study of 60 graduate students taking an online course on teaching, Thormann and Fidalgo (2014) conducted a content analysis of a course assignment in which students were asked to discuss their impressions of a discussion-moderator assignment. The results suggested that having clear



### Before you go...

Check your understanding of the material in this unit.

Can you...

- 1) Explain what is meant by bifurcated sentencing process?
- 2) Describe the process of appeals in a death penalty case?
- 3) Clearly identify aggravating and mitigating circumstances?

If so, move on to the next unit. If not, review the material in this unit before moving on to the next.

Figure 2. End-of-Unit Simple Formative Assessment in the Blackboard LMS

documentation for assignments and providing areas for students to ask questions of instructors, such as a dedicated discussion forum, were effective means of leading classes and promoting student success. By employing these methods, instructors are able to provide scaffolding without overwhelming their own workloads.

#### *Create Reusable Formative Assessments*

Another strategy for controlling instructor workload while employing the techniques of scaffolding is developing formative assessments. The purpose of a formative assessment is to provide the learner with information about progress toward mastery of an instructional goal. Often, these types of assessments are not scored but provide valuable information for the learner and the instructor in the learner's progress toward the instructional goal (Cross and Palese, 2015). Formative assessment can be implemented in online courses in a number of ways that do not overwhelm instructional workload. A very basic form of formative assessment involves the implementation of review questions that a student should be able to answer by the end of each unit. In an online format, these review questions could be added at the end of a learning module to allow students to check their progress before moving on to the next module. These assessments could take the form of review questions or a brief quiz that is not scored or scored for completion to help students gauge their own understanding of the material. Students can be provided feedback in order to find areas of weakness or concepts/skills that need to be reviewed before moving forward. Figure 2 shows a very basic version of a formative assessment that could be used in Blackboard by creating a list of questions and key ideas that students should be

able to master by the end of the unit. This type of assessment could easily be copied between sections and terms, which limits instructor preparation at the beginning of each course.

When using quizzes as formative assessments, many LMSs allow the instructor to provide feedback or hints within the quiz to help students who initially choose incorrect answers. The LMS can also be set up to allow students to retake the quizzes as many times as needed in order to master the skills. Most LMSs allow these types of assessments to be saved for reuse or copied to other sections of the course, which saves the instructor time in not having to recreate the assignments each time the course is taught. Again, these assessments can be used across sections and semesters to maximize instructional potential while minimizing instructor workload in developing assignments. MacKenzie and Ballard (2015) found that implementation of activities provided by textbook publishers, such as matching exercises and multiple-choice quizzes, can be valuable in providing scaffolding and formative assessment for students in online classes. Crews, Wilkinson, and Neill (2015) surveyed 179 students in an undergraduate online business course and found that on average most students agreed that automatic grading of assignments was a useful technique for promoting student learning. Students value the ability to receive prompt feedback. Figure 3 provides an example of a formative assessment quiz in Blackboard in which the instructor has set up feedback for the learner for correct and incorrect answers.

Depending on the instructor's technical skills or access to publisher resources, formative assessments could take many different forms. Instructors could incorporate interactive online modules, videos, and

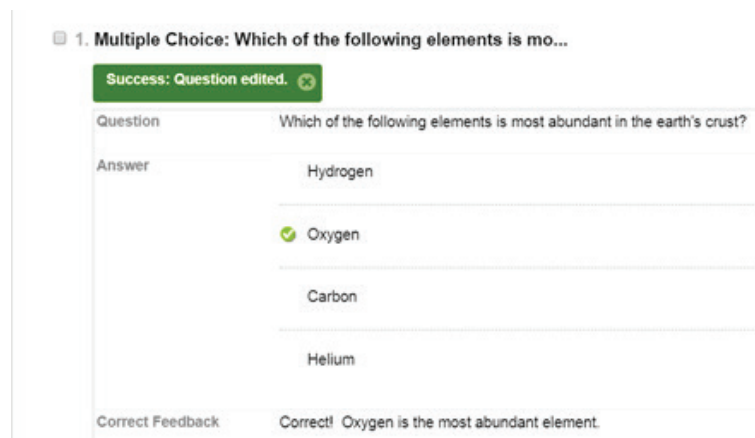


Figure 3. Formative Assessment Review Quiz with Feedback for Correct and Incorrect Answers in the Blackboard LMS

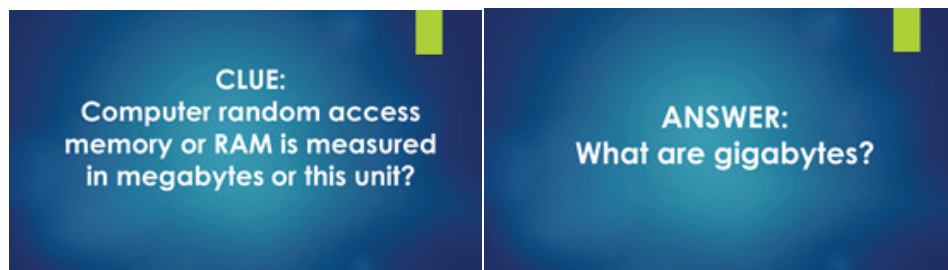


Figure 4. Example of Flashcard Review Assessment Created in Microsoft Powerpoint

games to be used as formative assessments, just to name a few. Free resources like Quizlet allow instructors (or students) to create flashcards and link them to the course. Instructors can also use free online resources (or PowerPoint) to create review games like Jeopardy to be used as a form of formative assessment. Resources like Quizlet and online games can often be linked to the course via a weblink, which makes them reusable across sections and course terms. Videos, files, and PowerPoints that are created by the instructor can also be saved and used across sections and terms. These resources take a period of time for initial set up, but they could be used multiple times with minimal updates to reduce time spent in creating materials. Figure 4 provides an example of a very simple PowerPoint set up that could be used as flashcards or a Jeopardy game with additional clues. These types of assessments allow students to interact with the material without overwhelming instructional workload. Furthermore, students could be tasked with creating their own formative

assessments in PowerPoint or Quizlet and posting them to the course. This allows students to engage with the material and with each other in creating formative assessments. In a case study of midterm evaluations for two online courses at the same university, Medical Terminology and Pathophysiology I, Peterson (2016) found that students believed that more opportunities to practice their skills and knowledge would help them be more successful in the course. Formative assessments are an efficient way to provide students with those opportunities..

These types of assessments provide interactive instruction for students and contribute to learning without a great deal of instructor intervention.

#### *Scaffolding Assignments*

Another form of scaffolding that could be used to make assignments meaningful without overwhelming instructional workload is the practice of breaking down large assignments into smaller parts and providing feedback along the

<b>Week 4</b>	Upload a paragraph explaining your topic for the paper, how it relates to the course content, and what you see as being your unique contribution to the class.
<b>Week 6</b>	Upload an annotated bibliography of five scholarly sources that you will use in your paper. This will be worth 5% of your final project grade.
<b>Week 8</b>	Upload a one-page outline of your project. This should be in an outline format using proper outlining techniques (I, II, III, A., B., C., etc.) and should incorporate the sources from your annotated bibliography. This will be worth 5% of your final project grade.
<b>Week 12</b>	<b>Final Project Due</b>

Figure 5. Outline of Scaffolding Employed in a Final Research Project

way. For example, large research papers could be broken down into parts with sequenced due dates, such as one assignment focusing on the literature review, one focusing on data and methods, and one focusing on analysis. Figure 5 shows an example of a research project being broken down by steps.

The first task is not scored and asks students to write a brief proposal of what they would like their final projects to cover. This allows the instructor to assess whether the students are on the right track in terms of fitting the criteria for the assignment and provide suggestions on how students could successfully move forward on the project. As suggested by the concept of scaffolding, some students require a great deal of support in this area, while others require very little (Dabbagh, 2003). By using this method, instructors are also able to find areas where all students may need clarification or more instruction and can provide feedback or clarification to the class as a whole, which will minimize the need to provide individualized feedback in initial stages of the project. The second part of the assignment requires that students create an annotated bibliography of at least five scholarly sources that they plan to use in their final projects. Prior to completing this part of the assignment, students are provided with instructions on how to identify and find scholarly sources. The annotated bibliography is worth a small percentage of the overall project grade and provides an opportunity to give feedback to students on whether or not their sources meet the requirements and are a good fit for the final project. The third part of the assignment

requires an outline of the overall project, which incorporates the sources from the annotated bibliography. Again, this allows the instructor to provide guided instruction for those who need it and overall suggestions to the whole class. Finally, the students are able to put all of the information together to complete their research papers, which is the summative assessment of their progress. Baasanjav (2013) discusses a similar pattern for a term paper in an online digital media class. Using this method allows instructors to focus feedback on students who may need additional support or provide messages of clarification to the entire class, which potentially eliminates individual email correspondence and allows the instructor to spread the grading workload over the course of the semester as opposed to larger grading loads at the time of the summative assessment.

Baasanjav (2013) also describes using sequencing for a website design project in the same class described above. Students are required to first examine a current website, then create a home page for their own website, and then finally fully develop their own website. These smaller assignments are useful in keeping students on track and providing opportunities for the instructor to offer feedback throughout the process without overwhelming instructional workload. In a case study conducted on the class over four sections, Baasanjav found that students valued the feedback that was provided throughout the class and projects. While chunking assignments, instructors' workloads are broken down into more manageable pieces and ultimately

allow for identifying areas that need improvement prior to the end of the term. Baasanjav also used the opportunity to create weekly emails to provide guidance to the whole class, which students identified as being one of the most valuable parts of the course in course evaluations. These messages directed at the entire class aided in streamlining the assignment while making it meaningful for the students.

In order to scaffold assignments, instructors might also build in support from peers to provide feedback. Peer review is a method for incorporating student to student interaction and scaffolding in the online environment, while also encouraging collaboration. According to Dabbagh (2003), scaffolding can include receiving instruction from an instructor and also a more knowledgeable peer. Peer review could be facilitated with a number of tools including file shares, discussion boards, or wikis. Southern Oregon University's Distance Learning Center (2009) suggests that instructors group students into pairs or triads to provide feedback. Instructors should be clear about their expectations and the guidelines for assessment. Assigning students to review the work of multiple students could be helpful in avoiding pitfalls associated with poor feedback from other students. It also can aid in having students of multiple skill levels within the same group. Bostock (2000) used peer assessment as a strategy for evaluating student-created web applications. Of sixteen students who answered a survey on the experience, most reported finding peer assessment to be helpful in reviewing the project. Bostock points out that these students received more feedback than one instructor was capable of providing, which ultimately improved their overall outcomes. This strategy can be useful for providing students with support without overwhelming the instructor's workload.

#### *Create Choices for Summative Assessments*

Research suggests that creating choices for students can enhance learning in order to reach students with different modes of learning (Fleming & Mills, 1992). This can be challenging for instructors in the online environment. Trying to engage all types of learners can be very time-consuming if instructors attempt to make several different assignments to reach learners of many different learning styles. One strategy for dealing with this is to create assignments that allow students

to choose how they will present the material, thus contributing to a learning-centered environment (Irwin & Hepplestone, 2012). Instead of requiring students to write a paper and then create a visual aid as many classes do, instructors can create assignments in which students get to choose their preferred learning style to complete the assignment. For example, for a research project, students could choose to write a traditional research paper, create a video presentation, or create a web-based project. While all projects must include many of the same parameters, such as original research, the use of scholarly sources, and a clear connection to the class, students could choose how to present their material. While the standards for evaluation are the same, which streamlines the grading process, projects like these could engage different types of learners with different learning styles. It also allows students to engage with the material in the way that is most meaningful for them.

Another method for creating choice without overwhelming instructor workload is to provide opportunities for students to set their own deadlines for projects. For example, instructors can create journal assignments that take place over the course of a term. According to Poe and Stassen (n.d.), in more independently structured courses, creating journal assignments can provide "touchpoints" for instructors to see students' work and provide the course with more structure. As an example, instructors may provide a list of weekly essay topics for students and allow students to choose a certain number of weeks in which to respond. This allows students to engage with the topics that most interest them while working with their own schedules. In addition to the flexibility benefits for students, this can also be helpful for an instructor in distributing the grading workload over the course of the term, as opposed to creating deadlines for all students to submit papers at one time. Figure 6 provides an example of weekly reaction paper topics for a course on corrections.

Blogs can be another form of summative assessment in online learning that provide choices and incorporate interactivity and scaffolding. According to Rhode (2009), blogging has been an effective tool in engaging students in online learning. In Rhode's study of adult learners in a certificate program, many students found the blog format to be a valuable way of participating in



Due Date	Topic(s)	Question(s) for Essay
Week 3 9/5	Community Corrections	Is it possible to provide sufficient supervision for the high number of offenders who are currently on probation in the United States? Why/why not? What are the consequences of the extensive use of probation in the United States? Defend your answer with credible support.
Week 4 9/12	Intermediate Sanctions	How can the corrections system know if an offender is a suitable candidate for community treatment? How can judges truly determine if someone qualifies as a threat to society? Defend your answer with credible support.
Week 5 9/19	Jails	Many sheriffs, who run local jails, are elected officials. What are the pros and cons of having an elected official run a jail? What role does the political process play in jail administration? Defend your answer with credible support.

Figure 6. Possible Weekly Reaction Paper Topics for a Corrections Course

formal and informal interaction and many found it preferable to instructor-led discussion boards. To ensure that blogs are useful interaction tools, Southern Oregon University's Distance Education Center (2009) suggests ensuring that assessments are aligned with course objectives and that rubrics are used to help guide expectations. Blogs can be a useful tool for breaking down assignments to provide scaffolding and also to engage students in interaction. As mentioned above, lengthy projects can be broken down into smaller pieces and posted on a blog within the LMS. Some examples of how blogs could be used for assignments include having a journal of experiences within the course. For example, students could post reflections to the reading in a blog format to allow other students to read the responses. Students could also provide updates on service learning projects and consult with other students for help on problems they may be experiencing in their projects. Students can glean ideas and support each other in the blog format. This relieves the burden of feedback and scaffolding completely from the instructor and provides an opportunity for classmates to interact and guide each other. In a study of an online course that utilized several short-text assignments throughout the term, Earl (2013) found that students valued the variety in the assignments and the ability to be creative. Brief assignments, such as weekly response papers, journals, or blogs, can be beneficial to student learning and spread the

workload over the course term for instructors.

#### *Encourage Collaboration*

There are numerous ways that collaboration can be implemented in the online environment. To ensure that collaboration is utilized, instructors must ensure that the goals of the project facilitate students working together to achieve a goal and not merely breaking up a project and completing different sections individually with little interaction (Garrison, 2006). Creating a collaborative space online can be useful for groups in completing these projects. These tools can be used to help group members discuss ideas, share files, create materials, and edit those materials (Fichter, 2005). The workload of the project must be manageable for students to adequately reflect on what they are learning in order to successfully move through the collaboration process. Finally, instructors must be intentional in feedback and involvement with the group. Instructors must be skilled in facilitating groups and encouraging group cohesion (Garrison, 2006). With these practices in mind, collaboration is a useful method in engaging learners.

In an LMS, like Blackboard, some useful tools could include using the Group feature to create group discussion boards and file sharing. Students could be tasked with assignments like addressing a case study in groups, working on individual problem-based scenarios, and/or creating discussion groups for various topics. Each group can discuss their given scenario and then the class

The screenshot shows the Blackboard LMS 'Groups' interface. At the top, there are tabs for 'All Groups', 'Group Sets', and 'All U'. Below the tabs, there is a header section with the title 'Groups' and a descriptive paragraph: 'You can facilitate collaboration among students by setting up groups. Groups allow students to establish a closer virtual relationship with members of the class and promote a sense of online community. [More Help](#)'. Below the header, there is a green navigation bar with buttons for 'Create', 'Import', 'Export', and 'Group Settings'. The main content area features a table with columns for 'Name', 'Group Set', 'Enrolled Members', 'Self-Enroll', and 'Available'. There are also 'Bulk Actions' and 'View Options' dropdown menus above the table.

Name	Group Set	Enrolled Members	Self-Enroll	Available
Book Review Group 1	Book Review Group	1	No	Yes
Book Review Group 2	Book Review Group	1	No	Yes

Figure 7. Dividing Students into Two Book Review Groups on the Blackboard LMS

can have an overall discussion incorporating all groups. The groups can be separated into different discussion boards using the Group feature, or they can be assigned different discussion threads within the same discussion board. With the latter option, all students can benefit from the comments on each discussion thread, even for the scenarios in which they were not assigned. Instructors can also identify difficulties that students may be having with the material and create a post that addresses these issues to the class as a whole. This provides both an interactive element as well as a collaborative element. Additionally, with the element of visibility of each group's work, the students serve as mentors for each other and are able to aid in the scaffolding of the material, which helps to manage workload for the instructor. In a study of 60 online master's students in an educational leadership program, Thormann and Fidalgo (2014) found that students valued the community built through group projects, with one student even stating that these types of assignments were "essential" to the learning environment and engaging students. Figure 7 provides an example of using the Group feature in Blackboard to run a book group discussion for two different books. This same format can be used for different case studies or topics.

Collaboration in the online environment can provide many meaningful opportunities for learning while helping the instructor to maintain a reasonable workload.

## CONCLUSION

Online educators face many challenging tasks. While they attempt to create meaningful assignments, they are also spending even more

time preparing their classes than their face-to-face counterparts in instruction (Kenny & Fluck, 2017). In order to find a balance, five strategies were suggested based on the concepts of scaffolding, interactivity, and collaboration. Instructors can anticipate student questions, create reusable formative assessments, scaffold assignments with multiple parts, create choices for summative assessments, and encourage collaboration. These strategies can aid in creating meaningful activities and assignments without overwhelming instructional workload.

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