

Teaching with Activities Online

If you've designed a course that involves student activities, you most likely have class meetings with a great deal of focused student interaction or reflection. It can be daunting to think about how to replicate that experience in an online environment, but it can be done.

Consider what you have students do in your face-to-face class

First, consider how you use student activities in your face-to-face classes. There are two things to think about here.

- How do you ask students to work: individually or with each other?
- What kinds of activities do you have students do in class? If you structure activities to create student interactions, you might normally have students solving problems, analyzing scenarios or cases, editing one another's work, role-playing, or doing some other group work that involves students sharing perspectives. If you structure activities that engage students individually, you might require students to record their thinking in their own words, come up with a novel examples of phenomena, or write down their thoughts in relation to a problem you've posed to whole class.

After you have identified the amount of student-to-student interaction and the kinds of activities you require of students, you are ready to plan for moving these activities online. Below, we focus on four kinds of activities that you may want your students to do online.

Structure your activities for an online environment

While we often think of class activities as requiring face-to-face or real-time interaction, there are ways to structure activities that don't require students to all be "in class" at the same time. The examples below demonstrate how you can have students engage in learning activities without having to work simultaneously.

Activities that require students to individually extend and reflect on their learning

If you tend to require students to pause during class and do activities such as record their thinking in their own words, come up with novel examples of phenomena, or write down their thoughts in relation to a problem you've posed, you can structure very similar activities online. Blackboard Journals allow students to write about their emerging understanding of readings, your lectures, or their own progress on projects. One advantage to collecting all of their ideas in one virtual space is that students can be asked to look through their responses toward the end of the semester and thoughtfully analyze how their thinking is changing and what that implies for further work in your discipline.

Activities that require students to solve problems or analyze cases

1. First, place students in groups so that they are only interacting with about 5-7 other students. This will create a sense of community that is similar to what they experience in your face-to-face classroom. The Groups tool in Blackboard works well for this.
2. Create a clear description of the activity that each group will do. The problem can be a challenging multiple choice question that requires students to apply what they've read for homework. Or, students might be required to view a short video case that serves as an example of how a theory they've studied could be put into practice.

3. Require students to post their response to a prompt that requires them to solve, analyze, apply, or evaluate what you've presented. Structure the activity so that students must first post an individual response. The Discussions tool in Blackboard works well for this kind of interaction. (See the Strategies section below for more information about this option.)
4. A day or two later, students can return to the discussion and carefully read their group mates' responses and use a response to develop their own thinking. This is where the interaction takes place. You might require students to:
 - Respond to a post that extends or completes their answer. Students should reply to that post by pointing out the ways in which their group mate's answer better represents course principles by being more accurate or more complete.
 - Respond to a post that contradicts their thinking. Students should use course principles to either defend their position in relation to this post or to change their position in relation to his post.
 - Respond to two posts that seem to present different perspectives and use course principles to try and reconcile these perspectives.

Activities that require students to edit or respond to one another's work

1. Pair students up or put them in groups of three.
Note: Groupings of three have a couple advantages: each student gets feedback from two classmates, and each student gets to see two other examples of the writing, planning, problem-solving, or thinking that is being workshoped.
2. Create a clear prompt that describes the kind of feedback that students will give each other and helps them focus on the most important aspects of their work. Keep in mind that asking students to describe or analyze their peers' work tends to be more productive than asking them to evaluate each other's work. This means asking them to look for particular features of each other's work or to determine how closely the work aligns with a particular set of principles or guidelines. For example, if students are responding to the first two paragraphs of a paper, you may require them to identify the thesis of each paragraph and two pieces of evidence that support those theses. If students are sharing a plan for a project, you may have the feedback focus on how feasible the project is and whether the project plan aligns well with two or three specific principles. The more structured the feedback is, the more productive this peer feedback activity will be.
3. Students post their work using a Discussion Board.
4. Students locate the work of their partner or group and post their feedback in response to their partner or group members' work, using the prompt you've created.

Activities that require students to role play

1. Pair students up or put them in a group of three. Having students work in groups of three can be helpful as it means that the role play can be done three times: each time two students are interacting and one is observing and making notes about what is or is not working.
2. Create a clear description of how students will engage in the role play, including prompts for how they should integrate course principles into their parts of the role play

and strategies for critical observation. Make clear how students should be applying what they are learning in the course when they engage in the role play, when they observe others' role plays, and when they reflect on their experiences.

3. Have students record their role plays. You can recommend that students use Zoom to do this, but students often have ingenious ways of making time to meet face-to-face or remotely to record role playing activities.
4. Require students to share their efforts with you to receive feedback. Students have access to different technologies, so be flexible in the kinds of recordings you will accept. If you are holding live virtual class sessions, you (and potentially other students) might watch role plays in real time and provide feedback.

Strategies to make the most of online activities

- **Place students in groups to ensure richer interaction.** Students tend to interact more productively online when they work with a permanent, small group of students. This recreates the intimacy of the classroom. Groups of 5-7 are ideal.
- **Use “post first” format to ensure multiple perspectives.** If you are using the Discussions tool in Blackboard, you can ensure that students post their original ideas first so they aren't swayed by others' thinking and change their answers. When you set up a discussion forum in Blackboard, be sure to select “Participants must create a thread in order to view other threads in this forum.” This means that students can only see others' responses after they've posted their own.
- **Make instructions to students clear.** Take the time upfront to describe the structure and length of the response you want and require students to use course principles in their responses. We often give these kinds of instructions verbally in a face-to-face class, but when we teach online we need to provide them in writing. For example, you might write instructions like this: “For this activity, you will view the video case twice. The first time watch the video to get an overall sense of the interaction. The second time, make notes about the details you are seeing that relate the reading by author X. Now that you've carefully viewed the video, it's time to respond to it. In a two paragraph response, provide a tentative solution to the problem in the video case using a key concept from the reading. Be sure to use details from the video case and be sure to articulate the key concept in your own words in your solution. Include one possible way that your solution might not work.” The detail you provide in the prompt will ensure that students do the kind of work you expect.
- **Structure student-to-student responses.** Be sure to tell students precisely how you want them to respond to one another in the online discussion. Without this direction, students will often revert to friendly but unproductive feedback. Focus students' feedback on particular perspectives (require them to find something they disagree about) or particular elements (require them to evaluate one part of another students work according to a particular framework) of another students' work. Again, give them a sense of how long this feedback should be and what structure it should have (for example, one paragraph with two specific examples).
- **Require students to reflect on how their thinking is changing.** Whether students are doing group activities or individual activities, their learning increases when we require them to look back over an activity or a series of activities and analyze their own

learning. After an activity or a series of smaller activities, require students to articulate how their thinking has changed in a short analytic reflection that can be shared with you.

- **Respond to students' work.** When we ask students to do an activity online, they don't see our reactions to that work. We are no longer walking around the classroom or asking students to share their answers and reasoning and then debriefing those responses and providing feedback. Feedback is necessary for students to make the most of their work, so this aspect of our teaching needs an analogous process online. Read through students' work and post a written, auditory, or video summary response that captures the areas where students made some important progress and where students struggled. You don't need to refer to individual students here, but rather point out what the tendencies were in the class. Then provide focused feedback where you saw students struggling. It can be helpful to highlight the strong ideas or interesting attempts that individual students have made as this can help students feel that you are reading their work carefully and invested in their learning personally. This can help recreate the face-to-face classroom feeling.
- **Pace student work.** If students aren't working together in real time, you can't ask them to complete an activity at one sitting. Have students post responses to an activity prompt one day and then come back to that prompt and respond to a groupmate's post a day or two later. On a third day, they may sum up their ideas and how they've developed. For students who are working individually, you may pace them so that they are doing parts of an activity across a week and reflecting on their progress toward the end of that cycle.

Helpful tools

When you've identified the kinds of activities you want students to do and the level of interaction you want them to have (with others or with the course materials individually), you can find tools that help you the most. Here is a short guide:

- If you want students to do activities individually, use Blackboard [Journals](#). Journals are also a good tool to use to require students to reflect on how their thinking is changing.
- The [Groups](#) tool allows you to put students in small groups.
- If you want students to do activities in groups, use Blackboard [Discussions](#) or [VoiceThread](#).
- If you want students to collaborate for role playing, consider using [Zoom](#) but recognize that students may wish or need to use other tools to record role playing activities.

Challenges you may face—and how to respond

- **You may be faced with more student writing than you're used to seeing.** Students need to feel that you are reading their work, so be sure to look over student interactions and respond with feedback that shows you have read and analyzed their thinking. You don't need to respond on discussion boards: it's more important that you demonstrate to students that you have read and diagnosed their thinking. Share with them what the trends were across discussion boards. And highlight a few really insightful posts or responses.

- **You may worry that you need to grade in order to motivate participation in online activities.** It is helpful to provide a simple point system that communicates to students that the activities are valuable to their learning but are also a place to experiment and take risks. If the stakes are too high, students will work for right answers and not explore their thinking or the thinking of their peers (which is the whole point of activities). If the prompts you've created have two or three parts, simply look for those parts and assign points if the components are there. When your prompt is specific enough, it will require the complexity of thinking that you want students to aim for.

Get support

- As you consider your options for teaching with lectures online, we encourage you to get support by [consulting with ITLAL](#). We look forward to working with you.
- If you need detailed help with features in Zoom or Blackboard, email askIT@albany.edu or submit a [Help Request](#).