

## **Group Activity Planning - The Next Generation**

As higher education expands usage of the Internet for teaching purposes, instructors are moving their face-to-face course activities to an online format. For many, moving course activities online is a new activity for which they have received little training or direction. As this trend toward online instruction becomes more prevalent, post-secondary instructors are starting to realize that teaching an online course means more than just placing lecture materials on a website for students to download (Lock 2002). To this end the Instructional Technology Resource Center at Idaho State University (ISU) has created the Group Activity Planning (GAP) guide to assist instructors in developing meaningful web-based group activities.

The GAP guide provides a procedure that offers faculty a reflective process for selecting group activities that fit the instructor's pedagogy, the needs of the learner, and the objectives of the course. This reflective design process utilizes strategic actions for those faculty members developing online group activities. The GAP includes ten strategic actions that are used to design, develop, and facilitate online group activities:

1. Compose Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes
2. Reflect on Design Considerations
3. Examine Online Group Activities
4. Develop Assessment
5. Select Roles and Create Groups
6. Choose a WebCT Tool
7. Design Online Group Activity
8. Facilitate Activities in WebCT
9. Provide Communication Practices
10. Evaluate Group Activity

### **1) Compose Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes**

Before the instructor begins the process of answering the reflective questions in the GAP guide, specific course goals need to be identified. A needs assessment will determine the course goals by identifying what the instructor requires learners to know after completing the course

(Dick, Carey, and Carey 2001). Identifying learning outcomes is important to designing group activities, but each course objective should have one or more learning outcomes. Learning outcomes can be broken into five major categories: intellectual skills, cognitive strategies, verbal information, motor skills, and attitudes (Gagné 1992). Identifying learning outcomes helps the instructor to develop the type of online group activity that will focus on the desired student performance.

For example, a verbal learning outcome might be accomplished by having each group generate a list of terms with definitions used to construct crossword puzzles that would be facilitated in the WebCT discussion tool or student presentation tool. An intellectual skill may be disseminated by having each group solve each other's crossword puzzles. A cognitive strategy can be administered through a case study reading that requires prerequisite knowledge to solve online discussion questions assigned to each group. An attitude outcome might involve an online discussion in which students are asked to give a personal, meaningful response to a reading.

## **2) Reflect on Design Considerations**

The GAP questions allow the instructor to reflect on his or her present teaching methods, which help determine group communication activities that address course goals through a series of reflective questions. Palloff and Pratt (1999) suggest having the instructor explain the group activity to the students and ask the students to provide feedback about how they might contribute to the group. The students and the instructor play an important role in facilitating the learning outcome for a specific course goal.

The GAP reflective process helps instructors make decisions about their desired approaches and tools used in WebCT. It lists examples of how to develop communication exercises that match the learning outcomes of the activity and WebCT tool. Integrating learning

outcomes with group communication activities provides instructors with a guide for identifying and administrating online course activities.

### **3) Examine Online Group Activities**

Group activities can be integrated into the entire structure of the course. For instance, the instructor can include group activities at the beginning of the course that both introduce the students to other students and the technology. Sending and receiving the first message in a threaded discussion topic can assuage much apprehension toward using the technology. Learners should be encouraged to share their personal stories and biographies at the beginning of a course, which will assist them in developing a sense of personal “identity” and a shared rapport with others online (Weisenberg and Willment 2002).

During the first week of class, this may involve a “Getting to Know You” activity in the discussion tool, whereby students answer questions such as who they are, where they are from, and what kind of fears they have regarding the technology. Such activities encourage students to get to know each other while introducing the technology to them in non-threatening ways. The process of selecting or developing an online group activity should take into account the students’ level of ease with the technology and their ownership of the process.

### **4) Develop Assessment**

The greatest challenge in collaborative learning is ensuring individual accountability while promoting positive group identity (Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005). The GAP guide promotes the use of both individual and group grading when assessing online group activities. Individuals can be graded based on their roles and responsibilities attached to the group’s objectives. Grading criteria should be developed based on the objectives of the activity and must demonstrate both individual and group accomplishments. Developing evaluative criteria should

make the activity worth the student's effort by assigning a grade value that acts as an incentive for the students to work hard to successfully accomplish the activity.

### **5) Select Roles and Create Groups**

Two concerns emerge when creating online groups: group size and group membership. Group size can effect the group's ability to work together to accomplish specific group activity goals. Group membership can be more or less homogeneous, depending on the desired learning outcomes. The GAP guide leads instructors through a series of questions to determine the size and membership of their group(s).

For effective small-group work, two to six members is the general rule (Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005). Although, according to Graham (2002), there is a limited amount of research regarding size factors in virtual groups. The optimal group size is dependent upon on many contextual variables such as the nature of the task, the maturity of the individuals, and the kind of resources available to complete the task. Coordination between members of larger groups can be more difficult to manage and may require a higher level of skill and maturity. Smaller groups can exhibit more interaction between students and produce a higher level of individual responsibility (Graham 2002).

Group membership selection can be random, student-selected, or teacher-selected. The selection process can be based on interests, abilities, attitudes, or a collection of many other possible distinctive characteristics. Like determining group size, determining the level of group homogeneity is dependent on the goals of the activity and the nature and maturity of the students involved (Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005). Homogeneous groups can lead to greater student satisfaction, while heterogeneous groups can provide the students with a richer experience by working with a diverse group of peers (Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005).

After assigning students to groups, roles can be given to individual members to help give purpose to their participation within the group. Assigning roles also ensures that various aspects of the learning task are addressed and can improve group processes by encouraging interdependence among group members. If the groups formed are long-term ones, the roles can be rotated so that different members fulfill different roles throughout the life of the group to practice various social, communication, and leadership skills (Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005). The GAP guide suggests six different roles that can be modified to meet the needs of the instructor:

- Facilitator — gets the group started and moderates discussion
- Recorder — summarizes group discussions and records any assigned team activities
- Reporter — serves as group spokesperson to the instructor or other groups
- Timekeeper — keeps the group aware of time constraints and on task
- Opposer — plays the “devil’s advocate” to make sure members are considering all options

(Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005; Caverly 2002)

## **6) Choose a WebCT tool**

The various online asynchronous and synchronous communication tools are available in WebCT to support faculty designing group activities. The communication tools (e.g. discussion, chat, email, calendar, etc.) provide the ability to connect the learner with the others in the course and provide the instructor with a powerful approach to facilitate learning. The GAP guide introduces examples of WebCT group activity tools with an explanation of each tool and technical guidelines for administrating activities. The GAP guide promotes student participation and accountability through careful selection of online tools.

## **7) Design Online Group Activities**

The design section of the GAP provides course designers with a worksheet that allows them to fill out the objectives, choose group activities, select WebCT tools, identify learning

outcomes, determine group sizes, establish time requirements, and assign roles. A sample form was created to help the designer write down the group activity strategies. When completing the form, the designer reflects on the previous sections of the GAP to make decisions about what activities will best suit an instructor's pedagogy, students' learning styles, and content objectives. The material collected in this form will allow the facilitator of the activity to develop the assessment and evaluation instruments.

### **8) Facilitate Activities Online**

When facilitating an online activity, the instructor should first introduce the activity by explaining what is expected from the students involved in the activities. Barkley, Cross, and Major (2005) suggest the following when introducing students to a new activity:

- Explain the activity
- Clarify the objectives
- Outline the procedures
- Present examples
- Remind groups of communication rules
- Set time limits
- Provide time limits
- Provide a question or statement
- Query students' understanding and let students ask questions

The GAP follows these statements with specific attention to technology and content objectives.

While observing students online, the instructor or facilitator should have a presence in the group activities. Discussion should be directed and redirected to make sure students are staying on task and fulfilling the objectives of the activity (Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005). The instructor generally guides the discussion by asking pointed, expansive, and sometimes difficult questions (Palloff and Pratt 1999). This is not to imply that one must reply to each student's comments, but rather act as a guide to help facilitate the activity.

The facilitator supports learning by generating activities that encourage student thinking through constructivist online group activities. They should help synthesize the student comments and help them focus on the end result. The WebCT discussion tool is a perfect example of how one can allow students to think about their ideas before submitting something to the rest of the group. This allows others to expand on someone else's comments and provides the facilitator with assistance in keeping groups connected and motivated.

### **9) Provide Communication Practices**

The GAP encourages faculty to utilize communication techniques that connect course content with the students' own process of learning. Information can be discussed and processed to help students form connections with the material, their previous experiences, and others' social contexts. Communication in the online environment encourages students to accumulate knowledge and familiarizes them with the process of learning collaboratively (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). Online delivery offers a variety of new possibilities that encourage the instructor to be a social director who facilitates the events and engages students in a community of social learning.

Tu and McIsaac (2002) collected qualitative data that found that social interaction must be established in the beginning of the course through the use of introductions, and students must be comfortable with the instructor and other students to begin a trusting relationship. In addition, students must be given the option to communicate publicly and privately with appropriate guidelines (e.g., grade questions should be distributed privately in email and not public discussions) about the use of different communication tools in the online environment in order to understand the appropriate use of private and public communication tools (Palloff and Pratt 1999).

Communicating in an online environment can be a new process for many students. Students should be encouraged to use proper etiquette or netiquette when communicating with others online. Expressing one's ideas online should not be threatening, embarrassing, or discriminating. When communicating online, students can employ non-verbal cues to express true feelings with emoticons (e.g., ☺ = smiling) and textual expression (e.g., capital letters=yelling). Emoticons and textual expressions provide online communicators with additional tools and methods to collaborate between group members.

### **10) Evaluate Group Activities**

The GAP evaluation instruments perform two functions: evaluating the process during the creation and facilitation of the activity and evaluating the activity after the students have participated. A rubric provides faculty with a formative evaluation instrument to measure the process during the design and delivery stage of the activity. A series of question sets address the summative feedback after student participation is complete.

The GAP evaluation instruments provide an instructor with clear guidelines for improving the group activity during the entire instructional design process. The WebCT tools capture and archive the data needed to evaluate the group activities. As the instructor begins evaluating a group activity, the process should involve student and colleague input to perform a nonbiased report (Palloff and Pratt 1999; Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005). The reporting process connects the learning outcomes with the group activity objectives. The GAP instruments help synthesize the evaluation data to support current activities and modify future activities.

### **Conclusion**

Each time an instructor engages with the GAP guide, new learning experiences are formed for the student. The learning opportunities increase when the learner is comfortable with the

collaborative process of sharing information, making errors, and solving problems collectively. Instructors at ISU are starting to see the benefits of the GAP process through qualitative online observation. The process of generating online group activities requires an instructional design approach, like the GAP guide, that supports the development and evaluation of the activities and helps instructors become more efficient with their time while improving the process of creating group learning environments.

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