

TEACHING ELEMENTS: ASSESSING ONLINE STUDENTS

CREATING ONLINE GROUP ACTIVITIES

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Incorporating group activities as part of an online assessment strategy provides several benefits for instructors and students, such as:

- Focusing student energy on producing artifacts and deliverables that are closer to what they will create professionally
- Assessing higher level learning outcomes—analysis, evaluation, creation—than may be possible with an exam or paper
- Enabling students to practice with online tools, as well as interpersonal skills like collaboration and leadership, in an online environment
- Promoting student engagement
- Integrating several learning outcomes
- Providing a mechanism to track student achievement over several weeks

This process is based on a model for implementing Studio-Based Learning (reference).

Identifying activities

Start with a list of exercises, projects, and assignments that have worked for you (and your students) in the past. Match these against a list of the defined learning outcomes for the course to see which activities you can use to address each outcome. Depending on how well the two lists sync up, you may find opportunities to combine activities—or you may need to develop a new one.

Developing the assignment

As with all online teaching, it's critical to communicate clearly with students when assigning the activity:

- Give students a breakdown of sub-deliverables, including due dates and the percentages toward the total grade for each.
- Articulate the purpose of the assignment—not just the course knowledge and skills that they will use, but how they will use them in future classes or professionally.
- Share your expectations for the level of work students must produce and how you will assess their work. Develop and share rubrics for each deliverable.
- Have students participate in a low-stakes assignment that will acclimate them to the process and technology they will use; for example, if they will be developing their project in a wiki, give a short assignment where they must navigate and contribute to a wiki.
- Make sure that students have access to the resources they need to complete the assignment.

- Set up channels for easy communication with you and each other, including a general course discussion forum that you check regularly, and online office hours when students can email or call you and receive a prompt response.

Finally, be flexible, especially the first times that you give the assignment; you may have to make some changes mid-stream.

The [RIT Sample Online Course](#) in myCourses has examples of group activity instructions written for students.

Other ideas for online activities

- Include a peer assessment component—usually five or ten percent of the project grade—based on their teammates' feedback on student contributions. [PeerEval](#) helps automate the process of getting this input from students.
- Define team roles to help students clarify who is accountable for which tasks, such as researcher, editor, etc. Either you can assign roles, or have students self-select.
- Depending on how well you know students, you can assign groups or have students create their own teams.
- Determine the flexibility students have in determining a topic or structure for their final deliverable. It's important, though, to focus on *content and quality* of the work rather than the format. For example, a group that creates a slick, professional video presentation is assessed according to the same criteria as a group that creates a simple PowerPoint. You can clarify this by developing a content-based rubric for the assignment.

Think about incorporating reflection activities as part of the assignment, in which students—as individuals or as the group—reflect on their learning in three dimensions:

- **Person:** Assessing their individual development and growth in gaining knowledge and skill, contributing to the success of the project, and working with team members
- **Process:** Examining the team's process in working together, including how they surfaced and managed difficulties
- **Product:** Evaluating the quality of the final product or artifact that they were charged with creating

Resources and references

Gaytan, Jorge, and McEwen, Beryl C., Effective Online Instructional and Assessment Strategies, *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 21(3), 117–132, Copyright © 2007.

Johnson, Scott D., and Aragon, Steven R., *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, no. 100, Winter 2003, Wiley Periodicals, Inc.