



## **Assignments and Activities for Online Courses**

We encourage you to take full advantage of the possibilities suggested by the online environment and to experiment with new approaches to student learning. The suggestions offered in this topic for creating assignments and activities are drawn from many different teaching and learning approaches.

### **Create a Good Balance and Variety of Student Learning Activities**

Create a variety of learning activities that employ different strategies for attaining the learning outcomes. In doing so, you will be more likely to appeal to the different learning styles that are present in the student population. You will also create opportunities for students to be exposed to diverse perspectives and to "stretch" themselves by trying new approaches.

When appropriate, vary individual reports and papers by having students create one or more of their papers as part of a small group assignment. Small group assignments, when well constructed, can help students understand the team approach to projects which is prevalent in nearly every field today. You may also find that many of your students take to this approach quite well because they are already familiar with it in the workplace.

Here is an annotated list of some types of student learning activities that can be successfully carried out online in the WebTycho environment:

#### **Ice-breakers**

This is an activity which enables students to get to know each other better at the start of a course or at the beginning of a small group activity. It is recommended that an online course begin with an exercise in which participants are asked to introduce themselves in the Conference area. Beyond general directions to introduce themselves, students can be asked a question that probes their initial understanding of a course topic, or elicits information about prior experience or current situation. For example, students might be asked, "What do you hope to get out of this course?" Or, in a philosophy class focused on contemporary moral issues, students might be asked "Which of the moral issues outlined in the text do you think are of most importance to society today?"



## **Read, Reflect, and Report**

Students can be asked to reflect on, summarize, analyze or synthesize ideas based on their required or optional readings (whether the latter are online or offline) and even on the weekly class activities and discussions themselves. Such reports and summaries can be presented either directly to the instructor or shared with classmates when appropriate. The instructor may also want to ask each student to take a turn to be responsible for one report or summary delivered to the class.

For example, "This week, Sara, John and Barbara will be responsible for summarizing lessons learned from chapters 10, 11 and 12 respectively. Please post your summary in the week two, readings conference by September 12. Your classmates will have the chance to ask questions or make comments from September 12-15. The three students and/or the instructor will respond to these questions and comments."

## **Read/Do and Discuss**

Students discuss either with the entire class or in small groups (in the Study Group area) questions and issues raised by the assigned readings, the instructor's commentary or a particular activity (such as a visit to a website). Whenever possible, the instructor should provide guideline questions or other clear indications of the scope and focus of the discussions. For example, ask students to "Read and discuss the chapter on modernization in Japan. What were the main stages of development? How were Western political and social ideas adapted to the needs of the Meiji government?"

## **Case Studies and Scenarios**

Case studies and scenarios can transform an abstract discussion into an opportunity to demonstrate concrete problem-solving skills. Instructors can present case studies and ask students to apply analysis to and answer questions based on case studies (as part of a quiz or a paper or a discussion) or they can ask students to identify or devise a plan or solution to a problem presented in a case study. Such assignments may be completed by individual students or students working in teams. Case studies may be relatively simple or quite complex but they are usually very effective when drawn from concrete real-life situations and help students translate principles into practice. For example, a case study in an accounting class might describe the accounting procedures used for a business and ask students to critique and devise a better approach. Scenarios can be more open-ended, asking students to respond to a series of changing factors and ramifications. A scenario may be combined with a role-playing or debate exercise.



## **Role Playing and Debates**

Instructors can ask students to research and take the part of a particular player in a given situation. (Online resources might be used to do this research.) For example, students can be asked to play the role of someone conducting an interview with a client, employee or student. Students may be asked to research the types of questions the law permits interviewers to ask in a particular situation. A debate is particularly effective in highlighting and bringing to life a current issue in the news and helping students to see more than one side of an issue. For example, students might be asked to read about proposed changes to certain policies and assigned to defend one side of the issue or the other. (An effective technique is to ask students to play the side with which they have the least sympathy or agreement!) You can also divide students into small groups and have each group research, present, and defend their assigned position. Finally, role playing and debates are made even more effective when they are followed up by an activity that asks students to reflect on what they have learned from their own involvement in the activity as well as from listening to others in the debate.

## **Guest Speakers**

Guest speakers can be introduced to provide alternate perspectives or to give students the benefit of their specific expertise and experience. It is essential that students are prepared in advance of the guest visit so that they can get the most out of the event. Guests will vary in their ability to participate asynchronously within the classroom or to supply information solely via email, so the instructor needs to be prepared to act in the capacity of both producer and director of guest "spots." (See more on Guest Speakers in week 4 of this training).

## **Peer-to-Peer and Paired**

Sometimes two is the best small group. By pairing up students to critique each other's work according to a specific rubric, students are able to focus on what goes into the making of a first-class assignment. Pairs of students can also work well together to produce short papers and projects. To reassure students that their individual effort is appreciated, instructors should ask to see each student's contribution (for example, early drafts) to a combined project or require that all work accomplished be visible in the Study Group conference area. Students can also be graded on how well they evaluate their classmates' work.



## Projects and Portfolios

Generally a project or portfolio is a work which occupies the greater part or all of the length of the course. It may be research-based, or involve creation of essays, reports, PowerPoint presentations, etc. A portfolio should ideally require that students choose and evaluate representative work.

Some activities are suggested by the nature of the course subject matter. For example, a course in marketing might have students work as a team on a mock marketing campaign, then present it to the entire class. A course involving environmental issues might ask students to identify, research, and report on problems in their local areas.

As you develop your course activities, be sure to work out all the details in terms of pacing, and write adequate instructions for carrying out the activities. Creating a balance between individual assignments submitted only to the instructor and other assignments, both formal and informal, shared with classmates is the key to producing a dynamic and engaging learning environment.

## Using the Conferences Area in WebTycho

It is often said that the Conferences area is the heart of WebTycho because the various forms of online dialogue most frequently occur in this part of the classroom. It is in the Conferences area that students ask questions of the teacher; it is here where students discuss ideas amongst themselves; it is here where individual students give presentations; finally, it is here where the teachers provide short commentary and clarification of ideas. While all areas of WebTycho are important, the living exchange of ideas between students and teachers happens for the most part in conferences.

In addition, the Conferences area should be the hub of your course. Even though, visually, the areas of WebTycho are distinct, they should not be intellectually or pedagogically distinct from each other. As you plan your course, you should make sure that there are clear relationships between the material in Course Content, Conferences, Webliography, and Study Groups.

Bear in mind that the Conferences area in WebTycho need not be limited to hosting "discussions" in the traditional sense, but may also be used as an area for presentation of projects or sharing of assignments with classmates. Many of the activities listed above can be successfully carried out in the Conferences area.



Here are some tips for organizing activities of any type in the Conferences area:

1. Carefully label each conference with titles and dates corresponding to each week of your class. If you know that certain topics are likely to stimulate a lot of discussion, consider breaking down the conference into two parts. This will keep the discussion manageable and easy to follow. For example, if you have six major subjects for discussion in one week, most or all of them likely to occasion a great deal of discussion, consider creating two conferences for that week, each containing three Main Topic threads.
2. Use the Policy Notes text box to write a short description of what is expected for each conference and instructions if needed. (For example, "This conference is for discussion of all week 1 topics" or "This conference is for posting of assignment #2 by June 10th. Be sure to create a new main topic with your name in the title.")
3. Make sure that you have a sufficient number of conferences to support your activities. There should be a conference created for each major activity in the course that involves discussion, sharing of assignments, or collaboration.
4. Always provide a casual conference such as a CyberCafe or lounge for students to socialize, introduce themselves, ask questions on the course as a whole or raise "off-topic" issues. This will ensure that students are posting only relevant messages in the regular weekly conferences.
5. Start the major Topic threads yourself, unless the conference is intended for the posting of student assignments. Label the Topic threads so that they clearly signify the subject of discussion. Initiating the Topic threads provides greater clarity and better organization and also has the added benefit of jump starting discussion among students.
6. Narrow down your Main Topics. An overly broad topic (e.g., The French Revolution: What Was It All About?) will result in fragmented discussion, with students creating too many subtopics.
7. Encourage students to follow some of the tips given in the introductory topic in this course on "How to Get the Most Out of These Training Conferences," especially those related to changing the subject Title of a response, when to respond rather than starting a new Main Topic, and quoting a portion of what one is responding to in one's own message.



## **Pay Special Attention to the First Two Weeks of Your Course**

While you don't want to overwhelm students at the beginning, do give students a schedule of activities that will:

- set a baseline for the pace of the entire course
- give students an indication of your expectations
- help you gauge student strengths and weaknesses
- give students an assignment that they can build on in subsequent weeks--limited enough in scope so it can be accomplished while students are still getting accustomed to the classroom

It's important to set aside some time during and after the teaching of your first online course to review and reflect on the effectiveness of your activities, assignments, and quality of interaction. Don't be afraid to trim back or augment an assignment, to change the organization of your conferences based on the degree of interaction stimulated by a topic, or to provide additional instructions or a new timeline that might salvage an assignment that proved confusing or overwhelming to students.