CalStateTEACH
TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM

Improving Online Interaction and Engagement
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Assumptions
Rich interaction and engagement of students, with each other and their instructor, is important to achieving desirable student outcomes. With online communication constituting the bulk of peer interaction—and a large portion of instructor-student interaction—effective online communication practices are *crucial* for the success of CalStateTEACH students.

Goal
Share practical strategies for getting students more engaged with their peers and their instructor, in the context of CalStateTEACH communication tools.

Moore, M.G. & Kearsley (2005) identify three types of interaction critical to successful online instruction:
- Learner-instructor interaction
- Learner-content interaction
- Learner-learner interaction

Literature Review: Key Factors
A brief review of literature and research on this topic identifies several key factors affecting student interaction and engagement in online learning environments.

ORIENTATION AND TRAINING
Wozniak and Silveira (2004) stress the importance of effectively orientating student to the process and tools from the start: "...to facilitate greater student to student interactivity, the e-moderators developed a series of tutorials conducted at the commencement of the semester, that aimed to orientate students to the online environment and promote the need for meaningful discussion through engagement with other students."

This study went on to conclude that "when CMC [computer mediated communication] is well-structured with initial student orientation to the online learning environment and learning activities showing them how to use asynchronous discussion efficiently; more effective student to student interactivity takes place."

The point: students more effectively use communication tools they understand.

IMMEDIACY
Easton (2005) found that immediacy (perceived psychological closeness) had a direct effect on student engagement: "The degree of closeness, comfort, and psychological safety that students experience is critical to successful online learning."

The point: relational "warmth" in an online environment improves student success.

SETTING THE TONE

Easton (2005) notes that instructors must foster immediacy by encouraging and modeling "warm" online interactions: "The data in this study suggest that students do not provide high levels of immediacy in the form of supportive feedback, compliments, or expressions of appreciation or agreement. If students are expected to assume more of this role, the instructor must consider ways to encourage different communication behaviors in the learner-to-learner exchanges."

The point: the instructor must set the "tone" of the online communication.

COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

Graham, et. al. (2001) applied the seven principles of effective teaching (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) to online instruction. In support of principle 1—"Good Practice Encourages Student-Faculty Contact"—Graham, et. al. find that instructors should provide clear guidelines for their interaction with students: "we recommend that student expectations and faculty concerns be mediated by developing guidelines for student-instructor interactions."

The point: students need to know what to expect from their instructor.

BUILDING IN INTERACTION

In support of principle 2—"Good Practice Encourages Cooperation Among Students"—Graham, et. al. recommend that student cooperation be built in to the discussion forums from the start: "Well-designed discussion assignments facilitate meaningful cooperation among students."

The point: student engagement, interaction and cooperation won't just happen.

INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK

In support of principle 4—"Good Practice Gives Prompt Feedback"—Graham, et. al. find that two types of instructor feedback are crucial: "Instructors need to provide two types of feedback: information feedback and acknowledgment feedback."

The point: your usual response to students, on your usual timeframe, may not be adequate.

INSTRUCTOR EXPECTATIONS

In support of principle 6—"Good Practice Communicates High Expectations"— Graham, et. al. find that students are better able to achieve objectives that are clearly stated: "Communicating high expectations for student performance is essential."

The point: make your expectations clear.

Applying The Principles

ESTABLISH AND UPHOLD COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES
1) Specify a response time for emails, posts, submissions.
2) Supplement informational feedback with acknowledgement feedback.
3) Clarify who a student should contact, and when.
4) Politely steer improper communications to correct party (i.e. tech support).
5) Consider establishing regular "office hours" in the chat room for one-on-one or group support.
6) Craft a "Communication Guidelines" document, and place it in your "Group Files" area.

MAKE SURE STUDENTS UNDERSTAND COMMUNICATION TOOLS AND PROCESSES
1) Supplement regional orientation as required.
2) Recognize (and address) the possibility that reticent students may be struggling with tools, not desire to participate.
3) Fire off "boilerplate" message to students struggling with tools.

INCREASE IMMEDIACY ("WARM UP" ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS)
1) Be human, warm, personable. Use first names.
2) Seek to build online personal relationships, not a "client" relationship.
3) Share personal stories, anecdotes and examples.
4) Write in a conversational tone.
5) Create a non-curriculum-related "fun" discussion forum, and post in it first. (No prescribed topic, or "About me" post, share funny experience, share and explain nickname, favorite movies/books/music, etc.)
6) Fire off occasional electronic thank-you notes to show appreciation to students for their efforts.

TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THE DISCUSSION
1) Write the first post in each forum ("READ THIS FIRST"). Tailor the discussion to your style, approach, students, current issues.
2) Reinforce/clarify the relevance of the activity. Preemptively answer the students' questions, "Why am I learning this? How does this affect me? Why should I care about this reading/exercise/principle?"
3) Continually refine your approach to writing/editing forum prompts. Each student group is different, and will respond differently.

FOSTER STUDENT-STUDENT INTERACTION AND COLLABORATION
1) Create opportunities for students to work together towards a substantive deliverable.
2) Consider pairing or grouping students by experience, demographic, technical proficiency. Create meaningful exercises to capitalize on these pairings.
3) Give students specific roles on a project (facilitator, presenter, recorder, designer, etc.). Mix up those roles through the term.
4) Look for ways students can actively learn *with* each other (desirable), if not *from* each other (ideal).
5) Avoid very large discussion groups; consider splitting off large groups into smaller teams or sub-groups.
6) Achieve critical mass; avoid very small discussion groups.

MAKE EXPECTATIONS CLEAR

1) Communicate clear expectations for student discussion posts: quantity, quality, timeliness. State these clearly at the start of each term. Set the bar.
2) Share real examples of exemplary and inadequate posts. Show them the bar.
3) Highlight exemplary posts from current discussions. Consider crafting a "this week in the forums" announcement to summarize and comment on notable posts.
4) Stress the importance of student commitment to effective online communication. This is their college classroom!
5) Launch "welcome to the new term" email to clarify expectations.
6) Craft a "Here's What's Expected" document, and place it in your "Group Files" area.

MONITOR STUDENT INVOLVEMENT, AND INTERVENE EARLY

1) Use the tools (reports, collate) to verify both the quantity and *quality* of student posts.
2) Intervene early to correct lurkers, reticent participants, "me too" respondents and others who miss the bar.

References

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