

"Ten Ways To Make Online Learning Groups Work"

This article by Lisa Kimball appeared in **Educational Leadership, October 1995**. Kimball included a number of steps which facilitators can use to make the most out of the online learning community experience.

Identify the Purpose --- Make it explicit. Will members exchange info? Generate new ideas? Learn and explore?

Define roles ---Peer learners? Team members? Support and encourage?

Create an ambiance --- Use the first post to set the tone, model message formatting. Your first response should model what you are looking for in responses. Don't be heavy handed and create a boring experience, but state the type of atmosphere you hope to create.

Nourish conversation --- Keep the group fresh and growing. Ask questions. Offer a case study. Suggest polling the group. Get participants to respond to each other. Watch for overload.

Provide feedback --- Encourage writers who contribute good messages by sending thank you e-mails. If negative feedback is appropriate, give suggestions for improvement. Encourage lurkers by asking them questions they need to respond to.

Adjust the pace --- If some participants sign on four/five times a day and respond, they may need to be slowed down for the others --- or the others may need to be encouraged to look on more often.

Support and recruit new members --- If new members join the group after it is in progress, get them to introduce themselves to the group. Encourage them to respond.

Recap by weaving -- Summarize and synthesize multiple responses --- or ask the participants to take that project on. Identify issues that people agree/disagree on, that may need more information. Weaving keeps the group from *spinning its wheels*.

Track participation --- Pay attention to who is doing what. Who reads which messages, who responds, etc.

Go with the flow --- No right answer on what should be happening, just pay attention so that you can be a more purposeful facilitator.

Godwin's (1994) principles for making virtual communities work:

1. Use software that promotes good discussion
2. Don't impose a length limitation on postings
3. Front-load your system with talkative, diverse people
4. Let the users resolve their own disputes
5. Promote continuity
6. Confront the users with a crisis

"Eight Ways To Get Students More Engaged in Online Conferences"

Dr. W. R. Klemm at Texas A & M wrote this article which appeared the [T.H.E. Journal, August 1998](#). Klemm stated that if you are "one of those teachers who have been tolerating lurking because you think you are doing students a favor, think again." To prevent lurking, Dr. Klemm suggests:

1. **Require participation** Don't let it be optional. Set aside a portion of the grade allocation for participation in online discussions. Let students know they must post x-number of times each week or for each topic.
2. **Form learning teams** The advantage for promoting online interaction is that learning teams should bond making each student want to do his/her share.
3. **Make the activity interesting** Give students a reason to get engaged.
4. **Don't settle for just opinions** Students should support opinions with data, rational discourse, etc.
5. **Structure the activity** Give students guideposts to help them think of things to say that are academically meaningful. Choice of topics is influential here. Organize topics around academic themes that serve course objectives. Consider an online debate: student posts a position, others respond with pro or con supporting arguments, group critiques arguments. Consider brainstorming online with students generating a list of alternatives. Have students reach a consensus on best choices followed by prioritization.
6. **Require a hand-in assignment** This activity capitalizes on the advantages of constructivist theory --- students learn best when they have to integrate, synthesize, and apply information. Students could attach their assignment to a bulletin board or mail post, or they could have a spot in Student Presentations in WebCT.
7. **Know what you are looking for and involve yourself to make it happen** When the professor participates in the conference, providing extensive critique, feedback, and encouragement, students cannot help but become more involved.
8. **Peer grading** Or perhaps better stated as peer assessment of a thread, etc.