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Discussion groups to build community online

25 June 2020

This past Monday the LTC offered an opportunity to reflect on spring term and discuss Flower Darby's book *Small Teaching Online*. Darby emphasizes the importance of community among learners in an online environment. Faculty took a variety of different approaches to building community in their online courses, but many of the most successful approaches had students work with a consistent group of peers throughout the term. This post explores one model for having students work with consistent groups throughout the term.

Kiley Kost (German) created discussion groups of four students who met for hour-long discussions during four Friday classes throughout the term. For each session, one student was responsible for submitting a 2-3 page summary of the group discussion as well as submitting an evaluation of their own and other group members preparation for and contribution to the discussion. Each group member was responsible for being the summarizer/evaluator once during the term.

Kiley assigned students to groups according to time zone, and she tried to avoid creating groups where three people knew each other well. Kiley explained the logistics:

"

> When I announced the groups I sent each group an email through Moodle quickmail and then I used a breakout session at the end of a class for students to introduce each other and decide who would write which discussion summary. I suggested that they just go in the order their names were listed on the email I sent out, but they could switch things around to accommodate work in other classes. Most students stuck to the order of group members I sent.

> I always provided detailed discussion questions for each section and made sure to post these immediately after the previous class session (this usually meant on Wednesday prior to the Friday discussion). Because students had the discussion questions available while completing the reading, they seemed to always be prepared for the discussions.

In addition to the four discussion meeting times, these groups also met once for a mid-term review session and once to peer review their final projects. Overall, the consistency worked well and the response was positive. Kiley did note one change she might make in the future:

"

> In some of the feedback I got at the end of the term, students indicated that they liked the discussion questions because it meant they knew what to prepare and could stay on task. A few students said they would have liked more flexibility because they wanted to talk about other themes or questions, but felt they had to "get through" all of my questions first. In the future, I would indicate a core set of questions that students are required to answer and then make sure they know that they are encouraged to explore other topics.

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How did you use group work in your courses this spring? Did you keep consistent groups or mix up the groups? What did you find worked well for you?

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