

Winter 2009-2 Faculty Learning Community
Teaching Project:
Peer Recommendation as a Participatory
Motivator

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1. "Why I teach"

Before addressing the topic of teaching, it is imperative to note that I enjoy learning (everything) far beyond teaching for the more I learn the better I can teach. That said, I teach because of the capability to affect more businesses with one act than I could as an individual. If I can teach the subject matter to 33 students at once and at the same time encourage them to learn to make a difference rather than just go out to make as much money as possible, then potentially 33 businesses that I probably never would have encountered will be better off. And in doing so, the positive changes present the potential to positively affect the communities in which those businesses exist.

2. "Metaphorically Speaking"

I have lived a life trying my best to avoid categorization or trying to fit into predefined molds, therefore finding one metaphor that best captures my teaching philosophy was at best time consuming. The result at this time is "challenger". I would like my students to challenge the status quo of any circumstance in which they find themselves, armed with knowledge or the desire to acquire that knowledge. And I try to lead by example.

3. Teaching Project Discussion

3.1. Problem Addressed

At the onset of the Faculty Learning Community my thoughts centered around the concept of ensuring student responsibility in the learning process by reinforcing elements such as academic honesty. The main idea is that through reinforcement of the sense of responsibility that “should” exist in every student. By the grace of God (yes I believe) an unexpected situation led me to an additional learning experience via the Essentials of Online Learning course. By combining the learning from both forums, specifically active learning and instructional design, I was enlightened to a different perspective of the same problem, and in the process, a new method of attaining the goal of student responsibility in learning. The new perspective resulted in the inspiration to try to address the documented problems associated with student participation in Active Learning and the student-based drawbacks of Peer Assessment.

I have witnessed the negative effects from both problems as an instructor as well as a student. The lack of student participation in the Active Learning process interferes with the widespread effectiveness of course delivery, through the voids in understanding that are left in those students that fail to participate. Lack of participation also emotionally affects those involved in Peer Assessment. At the time of the need to assess (typically at the end of the course), those who do not participate feel the threat of loss and press their peers to demonstrate “compassion”. Those who do participate (especially those in groups) encounter the climax of the stress build up associated with having borne the load to ensure their success, typically masking the lack of results from those that did not participate. This clash of emotions leaves strained relationships and ill feelings unwarranted in the learning environment.

By addressing these problems effectively, course design can include active learning components that ensure full and meaningful participation by all students, improving course delivery and student satisfaction, but most importantly, student learning.

Additional problems addressed by the solution below include student preparation for class sessions. As discussed throughout the FLC and during the Essentials course, students do not typically prepare for class sessions, e.g. completing text book and article reviews. While not the main purpose for the construct, solving the problem of student preparation for class should lead to a more rewarding in-class experience as students will be minimally aware of the subject matter to be discussed.

3.2. Proposed Solution

The proposed solution to the drawbacks of student participation and assessment in active learning elements of course design, is to introduce a graded item based on Peer Recommendations. The Peer Recommendation graded item will be based on the following course design elements:

1. The course will include several graded online discussion boards with topics based on the course material to be discussed in class sessions following the closing of each discussion. The discussion will serve as a forum for students to research and provide insightful statements on the specified topic. Student contributions will be graded by the instructor via the following rubric:

Type of Post	Explanation Given	Points Earned
Professional quality of posting	Posting contains no grammatical/syntax and spelling errors regardless of content meaning	1+
Exceptionally Meaningful	Post includes a relevant reference from outside the course material, such as a journal article or reputable website. The reference should relate to the discussion topic.	4
Highly Meaningful	Post introduces a new point of view or adds to the overall discussion, making reference to previously discussed concepts covered in class (e.g. from the book or from previous in-class discussions).	3
Moderately Meaningful	Posted statement contains a logical argument about the discussion topic, but does not refer to any material.	2
Slightly Meaningful	Post states a fact related to the discussion topic but contains no argument.	1
Not Meaningful	Post does not add to the discussion meaningfully or is irrelevant to the discussion topic.	0

2. All students are encouraged to read their peers entries and most importantly take note of those contributions that assisted in the learning process for the specific topic.
3. The student contributions to the discussion topics are used in the upcoming class session and will help form the delivery of the course material as elements of confusion or controversy are discussed as a means of enhancing the understanding of the material

4. At the end of the term for the course, students will have the opportunity to “recommend” one or more students for discussion contributions that helped clarify one or more specified topics. Recommended students will receive 10% towards their final grade.
 - a. Alternatively, the 10% component of the final grade can be pro-rated based on the number of peer recommendations each student receives, with the full 10% assigned to the student(s) with the highest number of recommendations, and there on.
 - b. Alternatively, the instructor may reserve the right to assign value to meaningful contributions in the event peers did not recommend the student who provided the contribution.

Via this course construct, I expect to enhance student motivation to participate in the discussion forums by assigning a reward for the quality of the contribution. Furthermore, I expect the contribution to be of “teaching” quality, given that the reward of the contribution is based on the ability of the contribution to improve the learning experience of other students.

The success of this instructional design element depends on the unambiguous presentation of the concept via the course syllabus, online course management system and first-day-of-class presentation. In the face of the inevitable student attitude to decide against participation in either of the two main components (especially the recommendation component), it is imperative for the instructor to emphasize what the students risk by not participating, which “transactionally” speaking consists of the loss of grading opportunities, but most importantly is the loss of learning opportunities. If a student is not recommended by peers for meaningful contributions, the highest grade attainable is 90% (unless instructor recommendations stated above are implemented).

3.3. Implementation and Effectiveness Assessment Plan

This instructional design element has been incorporated to the Spring 2009-3 delivery of the 0105-775 B2B e-Marketing course. There will be a mid-term student assessment of the value of the exercise as well as an instructor assessment of the quality and quantity of student participation. Adjustments will be annotated, and as deemed non-disruptive to the course delivery, incorporated into the remaining sessions.

At the end of the course, a full report will be developed on the effectiveness of the element, based on specific metrics such as:

1. Student participation rate
2. Distribution of student contributions by rubric grading
3. Number of student recommendations attained by each student
4. Number of students providing recommendations of their peers
5. Student satisfaction with the element (based on answers to an electronic survey)

3.4. Citations

The following references were used indirectly as I increased my knowledge of active learning, course participation and peer assessment. While the concept discussed above was not directly obtained from these resources, the concepts and problems they present helped form the approach.

McKeachie, Wilbert, J. Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers. Boston: Hoffman Mifflin Company, 2002.

Pelz, W. (My) Three principles of effective online pedagogy. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 8(3): 33–46, 2004.

Sainsbury, Erica J.; Walker, Richard A. Assessment as a vehicle for learning: extending collaboration into testing. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* (33; 2): 103-117, 2008.

Swan, Karen; Shen, Jia; Hiltz, Starr Roxanne. Assessment and Collaboration in Online Learning. *The Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*(10;1): 45–62, 2006

In addition to the resources stated above, I wish to acknowledge the instructor and participants of the 2009-2 Faculty Learning Community and Essentials of Online Learning course. The former was led by Rob Fain and the latter by Michael Starenko. The resources (human and literary) and peer interactions provided the direct basis for the approach described above.

4. Reflections of FLC

As stated above, I find so much more satisfaction in learning than in teaching, mainly because learning is the basis for all that I teach. I also find great pleasure in developing and sharing in non-standard ways of thought. The Winter 2009-2 Faculty Learning Community session provided the opportunity to engage in each of these passions. I reveled in the notion that my disappointment with student attitudes and the implicit need for popularity over substance was shared by other adjuncts as well. But most of all, I learned that I could teach better by learning about the intrinsic motivators of my students as well as the most effective way to teach them. From this experience I have reestablished my motivation to create the most effective learning environment for my students, where student satisfaction is derived from a sense of self-worth through truly acquired knowledge and learning capabilities. It is through this professed sense of acquired self-worth that I believe students will want to come to RIT and stay. And furthermore it is this self-worth that will serve as the embodiment of the great value of the RIT brand.