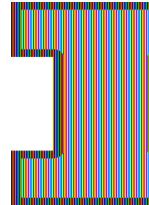# Increasing Student Engagement in Online Composition Courses

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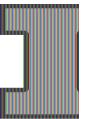
CALICO May 31, 2018

# Our Current Composition Course Scheme

Asynchronous, but not self-paced, content delivery

- Content lessons with text, videos, samples, and comprehension checks
- Asynchronous forum activities for practice/peer review
- Synchronous meetings for collaboration
- Major writing assignments

Illinois ESL Online Course Growth

- **2012 - 2017:** Summer only, **1** course for students to fulfill last-minute graduation requirements (multiple sections)
- **Fall 2017:** **2** courses offered
- **Spring 2018:** **3** courses offered
- **Summer 2018:** **4** courses offered
- **Rapid growth**, more interest and much better support and technology than 5-6 years ago
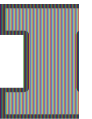
Challenges of Online Instruction

- International students may need more support in technology, language and style of online communication (Alexander, 2002).
- International students often feel shy about contacting their instructor for help.
- Lack of student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction is believed to be one of the main reasons for students dropping online courses (Yuan & Kim, 2014).
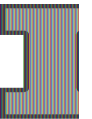
Four Ways to Increase Student Engagement in Online Composition Courses

1. Student-Teacher Conferences
2. Synchronous Peer Meetings
3. Announcement Videos
4. Forum Activities
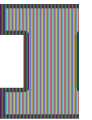
Student-Teacher Conferences: Why

- This can be an important feature in **f2f composition courses** and can fulfill the same **pedagogical role** in online courses.
- Conferences can **increase the instructor presence** and **"humanize"** the instructor.
- Conferences can decrease the feeling of **student isolation** and **demonstrate the ease of virtual communication** with the instructor.

Student-Teacher Conferences: How

- Aim for a conference **once every 4 weeks** throughout the course.
- Schedule the first conference within the **first 3 weeks**.
- Use **Group Conferences (3-4 students)** if you don't have time to meet with students individually.
- Students should be given something to **prepare in advance** for a clear outcome.

Student-Teacher Conferences: Lessons/Tips

- Technical difficulties are inevitable; **train instructors and practice** in advance.
- Use the **conferencing platform** provided by the LMS for a more streamlined experience for students.
- You should have **screen-sharing capabilities** for a composition course..
- Use GoogleDocs to **increase student interaction**.
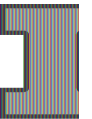
Synchronous Peer Meetings: Why

- Peer meetings build a stronger learning community and rapport among students.
- Students help each other with challenging aspects of the content and develop an understanding that they are not alone.
- Synchronous meetings result in higher quality asynchronous interactions.

Synchronous peer meetings: How

- Groups of 3-5 students arranged by the instructor at the start of semester.
- 3-4 meetings with the same peers throughout the semester (online or F2F).
- A team leader is appointed by the instructor.
- Students receive a detailed agenda and need to reach a specific outcome.
- Students are made accountable (self and peer evaluations).

Synchronous peer meetings: Lessons and Tips

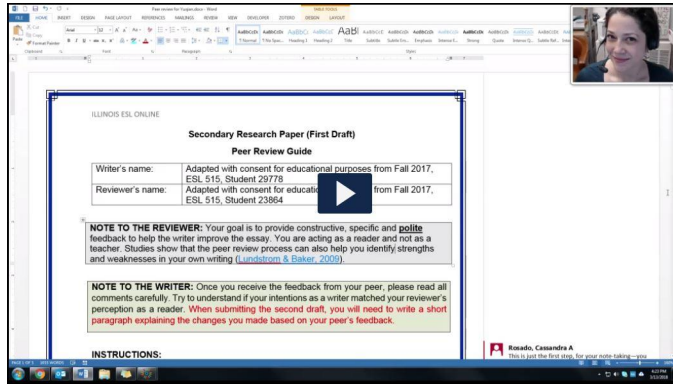**Problem:** Different experience with F2F and online meetings (due to technical difficulties).

Potential solution: Try holding a group conference.

Problem: Varying quality and depth of discussions.

Potential solution: Appointed team leader, detailed agenda, outcome-oriented meetings.
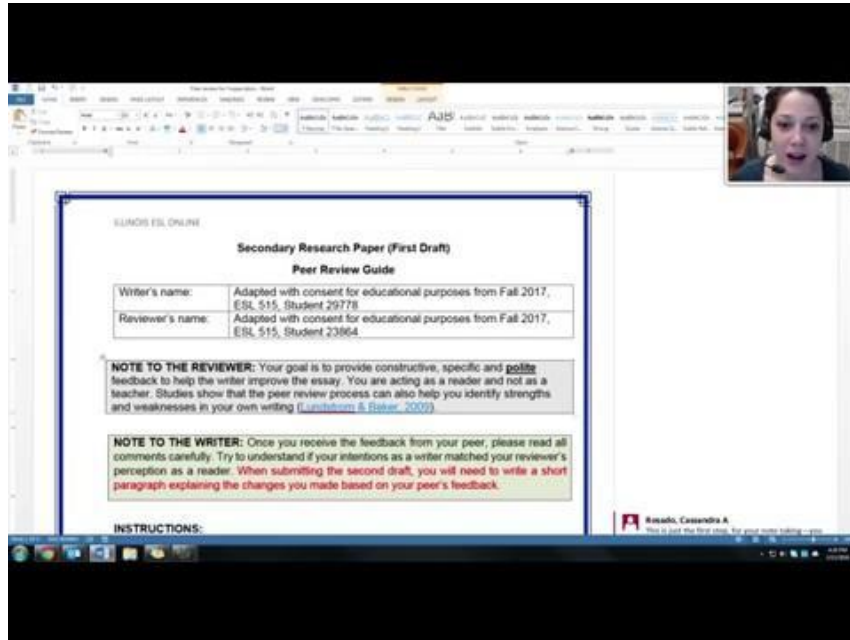
Announcement Videos: Why

- Videos can increase the feeling of **instructor presence** and "humanize" the instructor.
- Screensharing can allow demonstrations for visual learners and better **mimic multimodal explanations** in a f2f class.
- A more **personalized interaction** to contrast an otherwise "preset" environment.

Announcement Videos: How

- Use a software that's **quick and easy** (webcam software, Jing, CaptureSpace)
- Emphasize the **importance** of watching these videos immediately; if possible, **follow-up on lack of views** with individual students.
- Videos should be **no more than 3-4 minutes**.

Announcement Videos: Lessons & Tips

We're still learning!

- Started out weekly, overview of the week, very "canned". → Now we recommend that you **don't make it a routine**-- keep it **personalized and purposeful**-- consider *why is this better as a video*?

- Why **don't some students seem interested** in the videos? Different learning styles? Too slow in delivery of information? Reminders needed? Points needed? Announcements forum too "buried"?
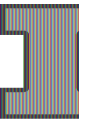
Forum Activities - Why

Forum activities in online composition courses provide opportunities for:

- Peer feedback
- Continued rapport building
- Skill building
- Sharing experience and reflection

Forum Activities - How

- Frequency: once every 2-3 weeks
- Initial post: specific task with a clear outcome
- Peer Response: detailed, clear guidelines for peer feedback
- Teacher response: in the forum or individualized feedback for each student

Forum Activities - Lessons and Tips

Problem: Less engagement and enthusiasm from students (Virtue, 2017).
Solution: More meaningful, in-depth interactions if forums are limited to peer groups.

Problem: Short, perfunctory student responses to peers.
Solution: Detailed guidelines and word limits; peer feedback training; teacher feedback on the quality of participation.

Conclusions and Takeaways

- All of these tools work together to make the course more engaging for students - you can't just rely on one.
- Make sure that engagement and interaction is consistent throughout the course.
- Using these types of activities for higher level learning (Bloom's Taxonomy).
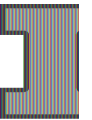
Time for Q&A!

[If Time] Please share your strategies for increasing student engagement in your online language courses!
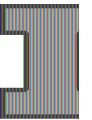
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Alexander, S. (2002). Designing learning activities for an international online student body: What have we learned? *Journal of Studies In International Education*, *6*(2), 188-200.

Virtue, D. (2017). Increasing student interaction in technical writing courses in online environments. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly,* 80(2), 217-235.

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