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Using Individual and Group Instant Messaging to Engage Students

Debbie Kilburn, a computer science professor at Cero Coso Community College, has two compelling reasons for using instant messaging (IM) in her online courses. First, it's an integral part of the content—she teaches an online version of introduction to computer information systems, and “learning about computers involves learning about instant messaging.” Second, it creates a sense of connection that, she says, improves student satisfaction and retention.

Kilburn uses IM for conducting synchronous chat sessions, as well as to provide individual communication with students. She also encourages students to add each other to their buddy lists and use the tool throughout the course as they see fit.

The syllabus explains how IM will be used in the course and how to get set up. In many cases, students have already been using IM, but not necessarily in an academic setting. Kilburn uses a multiprotocol instant messaging application and encourages her students to do the same. This makes communication easier across different synchronous communication systems, such as AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo!

Messenger, and MSN Messenger.

Group sessions

Kilburn uses IM for one-hour chat sessions throughout her online courses. She schedules them at different times and on different days to accommodate as many students as possible. She allows students to sign up for sessions that are convenient for them but limits each chat session to seven or eight people to keep each session manageable.

The chat sessions are not intended as spaces for formal writing; rather, they should be used for collaboration and brainstorming. The only thing Kilburn asks of students is to avoid multitasking during these sessions. However, she does not restrict the individual student-to-student instant messaging that goes on during group sessions. “Having multiple streams of communication going on doesn't bother me, as long as the students are participating in the [main discussion]. What I want [them] to get out of using instant messaging is some sense of community—some sense that there are classmates [whom] students can

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TIPS FROM THE PROS

Nine Strategies for Using IM in Your Online Course

Instant messaging can be an effective online learning tool that can build community and foster collaborative learning. The following are some suggestions from Debbie Kilburn, computer science professor at Cero Coso Community College, for making the most of this tool:

- **Explain how to get set up.** Although many students may have used IM, they probably have not used it for academic purposes. The syllabus should explain how to set up students' IM accounts. Have students use a multiprotocol instant messaging application such as Trillian or Gaim to make communication across different IM systems easier. Remind students to add each other to their buddy lists.
- **Offer group chats at different days and times.** IM can be used for group chats. In order to keep chats manageable, limit them to eight students per session and offer them at different days and times, so students can find a session that is convenient for them.

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turn to. In the face-to-face classroom, students may chat with the people sitting next to them or talk to people on the way out the door. Using instant messaging mimics that in the online classroom," Kilburn says.

The first group chat sessions occur during the second week of the course. During these group chats, students have the opportunity to establish study groups, and Kilburn encourages students to add each other to their contact lists. After this first session, each student has a group of six or seven people that they have already interacted with, whom they can turn to individually if they have questions. "Even if they don't talk to each other, they can see when [other students are] online, which gives them some sense that they're not in this by themselves," Kilburn says.

In addition to seeing when classmates are online, students and Kilburn get a sense of people's personalities when interacting synchronously that they might not get otherwise. "It seems that the people who are involved in instant messaging more tend to be a little more engaged. They joke around. You get a real sense of people's personalities. To me, that comes through much better than it does just in a flat discussion-board message. When you're chatting with somebody, or a group of people, you get a sense of who jokes around, who's more serious, who likes to think about things a little bit more. When I chat with students I've chatted with a lot, I can tell when something's wrong. They don't even have to tell me," Kilburn says.

Instructor access

IM increases the level of access that students have to the instructor. Generally, when she is online, Kilburn keeps her IM open, which

indicates to students that she is online and open to having a conversation. When she is not available to communicate synchronously with students, Kilburn turns off her IM. She encourages students to view this as the equivalent of an open office door. All she asks is that students who want to IM her let her know which class they're in and to keep the conversation focused on the course.

When Kilburn sees that one of her students is online, she may contact him or her as well. "I'm very random, especially if I see somebody come online whom I haven't seen a lot of activity from. I'll pop them off a quick note such as, 'Hey, I see you're online. Do you have any questions?' just to let them know that I am available for them if they do, but I don't force myself on them," Kilburn says.

IM uses

Not everybody likes to communicate synchronously, but for those who do, it can add a new dimension to an online course. When considering using IM for pedagogical purposes, instructors should carefully consider how they might use it.

IM is not a good way to deliver a lecture, Kilburn says. It's better suited to brainstorming, investigating, or exploring issues. "I set things up on two levels: here's how we're going to use it academically for class chat; but also here's a list of all the other people in the class. Add them to your buddy list. Reach out and connect with people, so that if you have a question, and I'm not available, you might see three other people on your buddy list and one of them might have the answer."

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A Guide to Creating Modular Courses

Andrea Henne, dean of online and distributed learning in the San Diego Community College District, recommends creating online courses composed of modules—discrete, self-contained learning experiences—and uses a course development method that specifies what to include in each module.

Creating online courses based on modules can benefit the instructor and students. Modular design offers the following benefits:

- **Expedited course creation—** Often, the task of creating an online course is daunting for the faculty member. Focusing on the components that go into a single module at a time simplifies the process, enabling instructors to more thoughtfully design each learning component. After an instructor has created that first module, he or she has established a framework for creating subsequent modules. “Once you’re happy with the structure and you’ve decided how students are going to interact with the material and what they’re going to turn in and how you’re going to do pre-assessment and post-assessment, the course design process is well on its way. All you’re doing now is the creative work of finding the resources, content, and activities that fit the learning objectives,” Henne says. In addition, by working on one module at a time, instructors can more easily see how each activity relates to the course syllabus and desired learning outcomes.
- **Simplified course updates—** Modular design enables instructors to target specific parts of the course for improvement without having to overhaul the entire course. Because each module is a

standalone learning experience based on specific learning objectives, when a publisher updates or discontinues a textbook, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the entire course needs to be changed. With a modular course, textbook changes might mean simply changing the page numbers of assigned readings or reordering the modules to match the new sequence of the textbook chapters. In addition, modules are portable. They can be easily removed for use in other courses or course management systems, Henne says.

- **Consistency for users—**By incorporating the same types of components in each course module, students quickly pick up on the course’s rhythms and patterns and have a better idea of what to expect than if the course were designed using a varying structure. “Often online students get a little bit lost, and they don’t understand what they’re expected to do. But if the course follows a format that’s recognizable and comfortable, then the second week and subsequent weeks are consistent,” Henne says.

Henne uses a template or “modular matrix” that outlines the components for each learning module. The template is not a cookie-cutter approach to online course design but rather a set of recommendations that instructors might find useful. “You don’t want to box people in to a one-size-fits-all formula because you want them to be creative and innovative,” Henne says.

The following are the components Henne recommends for each module:

- **Pre-assessment:** Each module

should include an activity that determines students’ initial knowledge of a topic before taking part in the learning activities within the module. The results of this activity can be compared to assessment results at the end of the module to measure achievement of learning outcomes.

- **Learning objectives:** These are specific statements, including the actions, performance criteria, and conditions of what students will be able to do upon completing the module.
- **Assigned reading:** Specify chapters, pages, documents, slides, lecture notes and provide guided reading suggestions or points for students to look out for in the reading.
- **Assigned writing:** Writing assignments can range from posts to the discussion board to formal papers. Each assignment should have a clear explanation of expectations and evaluation criteria.
- **Exercises/activities:** Each module should have an interactive activity for the entire class or for groups, which encourages critical thinking and practical application of the material covered in the learning module.
- **For further study:** Take advantage of the rich resources on the Internet and provided by publisher websites to enhance learning and stimulate students’ curiosity to dig deeper into the subject matter.
- **Post-assessment:** The end-of-module assessment should be in the same format (e.g., essay or quiz questions) as the pre-assessment to measure student progress.

Henne encourages instructors to include assessments in each

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Activities 101: Self-Check Exercises

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

My son is a junior in college, majoring in electrical Engineering. Some of his courses are incredibly demanding, if his textbooks provide any kind of indication. He recently described how a third of the learners in a differential equations class withdrew by mid-semester and how only a third of the original group of learners was still enrolled at the end of the semester. Each semester that this course is given, learner perseverance is very low. Some might say that certain topics are inherently difficult, and that having learners withdraw or flunk out weeds out the slackers. That approach may have some merit, but unless learners are given adequate tools to succeed, it's unfair in my opinion.

While working on my PhD, I took an upper-level statistics course that struck fear in the hearts of potential learners. We were fortunate because the professor clearly understood the difficulty of the material and used an especially valuable technique to make sure that almost everyone "got it." She developed a set of self-check exercises, which were handed out at the end of every class along with an answer sheet. The exercises were optional and ungraded, but nearly everyone did them, and those who did easily passed the course.

Gaining skill and confidence

Last month I described the value of self-check exercises, problems, and questions that allow learners to assess their knowledge, get feedback, and make use of additional resources or help. These exercises are typically optional but can be very powerful as a learning tool. Providing these exercises online, with self-grading and automatic feedback mechanisms, has many advantages. The advantages for learners are increased confidence, motivation, and persistence. The advantages to online instructors include having learners who require less hand-holding and reduced student attrition.

Graph 1 shows an example of a drag-and-drop self-check exercise I developed for a training workshop on improving employee performance. The purpose of the exercise is to determine whether learners know the typical sequence of actions that is used to determine what is causing a performance problem, so the correct problem(s) can be addressed.

Variations on a theme

There are numerous kinds of self-check exercises and numerous ways to develop them. **Table 1** shows some typical instructional goals and examples of appropriate

Graph 1

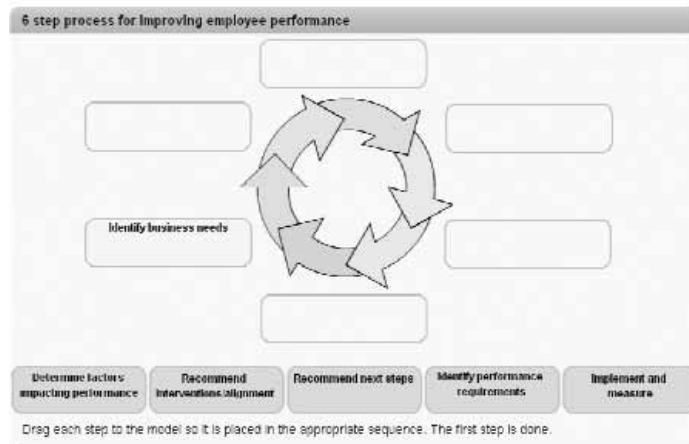


Table 1

<i>Instructional goal</i>	<i>Appropriate self-check exercises</i>
Remember terms and facts	Games and puzzles, flashcards, multiple-choice questions
Match parts with functions	Drag-and-drop or matching exercises, multiple-choice questions
Solve problems	Example problems, multiple-choice questions
Determine the likely result of actions	Branched scenarios; scenario-based multiple-choice questions
Solve complex problems that require taking numerous factors into account	Case studies

self-check exercises to help learners achieve that goal and know that they have achieved it.

Different self-check exercises match up with various instructional goals. For example, flashcards would be great for helping learners in a statistics course to remember the names and uses of formulas, whereas example problems would be more appropriate for helping learners solve problems using those formulas. Drag-and-drop exercises would help learners in an economics course match terms to definitions, but scenario-based multiple-choice questions would be more appropriate for helping learners predict the results of federal government actions.

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Tools

Self-check exercises can be built very simply using documents or simple Web pages. That’s probably the best place to start if you aren’t technically inclined or if you don’t want to use exercise-building tools.

For example, you could build a document containing the exercises and another that has the answers (and explanations). You could build a Web page (inside or outside of a course-management tool) that has the exercises, and provide links to other Web pages with the answers. Many course-management systems contain testing engines, and multiple-choice quizzes can be easily built and used as self-check exercises.

If you want to build more complex self-check exercises, **Table 3** lists some available tools that can be used to build a variety of them. I haven’t tried all of these tools, so make sure to test the demos to see if they will work well for you. The list isn’t exhaustive (if you search, you’ll find more), and some of these are free or inexpensive.

Providing adequate practice and feedback is a challenge in many courses or instructional situations. Developing self-check exercises can provide learners with incredibly valuable opportunities to determine how well their understanding matches what they should

Table 3

Type	Tool/link
Games and puzzles	Hot Potatoes: www.halfbakedsoftware.com/hot_pot.php Puzzle Maker: http://puzzlemaker.school.discovery.com/ Respondus: www.respondus.com/products/studymate.shtml
Games and puzzles	The Amazing Flash Card Machine: www.flashcardmachine.com/ Flash My Brain: www.flashmybrain.com
Multiple-choice questions	Hot Potatoes: www.halfbakedsoftware.com/hot_pot.php Quizmaker: www.articulate.com/quizmaker.html QuizMaster: www.cybertrain.info/quizman/qmhome.html Respondus: www.respondus.com/products/studymate.shtml
Branched scenarios/cases, simulations	Quandry: www.halfbakedsoftware.com/quandary.php Forio: Broadcast https://forio.com/broadcast/

know or be able to do. When self-check exercises provide answers, explanations, and links to additional information, learners can help themselves and increase their competence and confidence.

I hope I have convinced you to look into using this strategy in your courses. Start by considering which concepts learners have the most trouble with, and think about building self-check activities so learners gain competence and confidence.

Patti Shank, PhD, CPT, is a widely recognized instructional designer and instructional technologist, writer, and author who builds and helps others build good online and blended courses and facilitate learning. She can be reached through her website: www.learningpeaks.com. @

module to be able to monitor student progress throughout the course and to provide students with regular feedback.

Many course management systems have a selective-release feature, which enables the instructor to control access to parts of a course until a student has reached a certain level of competency. Achievement on a module can be determined by comparing the pre- and post-assessments or by the students submitting a checklist of tasks completed.

After years of teaching face to face, many instructors are able to begin teaching an on ground course without having the entire course laid out ahead of time. This approach doesn’t work well in the online classroom. Henne recommends that instructors have their online courses completely created several months before students enroll in them, and the template she recommends can help them meet that target, allowing them the time to focus on other aspects of facilitating online classes. “Faculty have been really grateful to see an overview of how to start, how they’re going to proceed, and how they’re going to end the course. Although the template is not designed as a lock-step process, it does provide a framework that supports the faculty member during online course design and development. All this goes hand in hand with faculty training on strategies for teaching online. This template is the foundation for effective online learning by guiding how you’re going to present your materials and how students are going to interact and achieve the desired learning outcomes,” Henne says.

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Be Aware of How You Write What You Write!

By Errol Craig Sull

We often do it so casually, so much matter-of-factly that we really don't think much about it: how we choose and use the words, sentences, phrases, and other text that make up our writings to students. Whether they are simple emails and one-word comments on assignments or longer welcoming messages and mini-lectures, they all have an impact on your students based on how you structure the word flow, choice, and position. The students' reaction to the "how" of what you write can go a long way towards making your course more or less productive, more or less satisfying, and more or less enjoyable—for both you and the students.

What follows are general suggestions to keep in mind when writing anything that will be sent off to your students; based on your own course, any of these suggestions may need to be tweaked, toned, and teased for a smooth fit. But no matter what your subject, always be mindful that what you write may impact the students who read it.

Always consider your audience. One size does not fit all; likewise, one writing style will not be right each time. Your audience variables could be many: from freshmen to graduate students, engineering majors to English majors, folks new to college courses and those still in college courses, students in the military or a farrago of students—the list goes on. Take these factors into consideration when choosing words, tone, and specifics.

Your writing should proclaim "professional," not "I'm trying to be cool and have you like me." The differences between a professional

instructor and his/her students are many, and one of these should be in the writing style of the instructor. Don't try to fit in, be cool, have them like you, or try to be one of the gang by writing like your students. Your purpose is to teach, and whether or not your students like you will simply come from the quality of your teaching. Using language in your writing that tends to mirror that of your students cheapens your professionalism—something you never want to do.

The number one rule of writing: you write for the reader. Your writing is not about you—your achievements, your dreams, your family, your political beliefs, etc. Sure, there are times when experiences and anecdotes from your life may be very helpful in bringing something into focus for your students. But when you write for your students, it is not an opportunity for you to carry forth your own agenda. Additionally, remember that abbreviations, acronyms, words, and phrases that are specific to the knowledge you have may not be familiar to your students. When you need to use these terms, be sure to define or explain them—you never want your reader to be confused or bewildered by what you say.

Don't hesitate to use language that personalizes you. Teaching via distance learning has very obvious impersonal qualities to it, and for those students who are new to it, this method of teaching can be very intimidating. Thus, the use of your own voice—as one that comes from a real person, not as computerese—becomes crucial. So don't hesitate to use contractions occasionally; use emotional language at times (including exclamation marks). Once in awhile, use a personal

experience or anecdote to make a point about something you are teaching. Every now and then, use sentence fragments to show personal emphasis. These language "touches" help to personalize your writing, thus making you and the course seem more "normal" to the students.

Keep your writing on track. It makes no difference what course you are teaching—everything you do becomes a model for the students, and your writing is no exception. Faculty who write as if there is no method or real thought to their words, phrases, and sentences quickly confuse—and turn off—students. Be careful not to wander off on tangents—don't stop in one thought and suddenly go into another—and keep your personal life out of your writings (unless it has some bearing on your topic). Never become personal with your students; if you are using humor to make a point, never offend, mimic, chide, or hurt. And don't forget: how you write is not only a reflection of you and your course, but also of the institution where you teach.

Get to understand the uses of bullets, indentations, parentheses, subheads, etc. Using these can add "flavor" and "flash" to your writing, while also making it easier and quicker to read. Keep a stash of your writings, subject topics, and related websites in a "Favorites" folder labeled "Writing." The more resources you have at your ready to help with your writing, the better. I have a few Favorites folders with websites broken down by various subject areas, such as Writing, References, Teaching, etc.; these not only prove helpful for me at

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Seminar—A Good First Venture into the Online Classroom

Like many instructors, Linda Romero, assistant professor of education at MassBay Community College, had some reservations about teaching online. Would her students be able to use the online learning tools? Would students become engaged in each other's progress? Would a lack of face-to-face interaction hinder learning?

Realizing the benefits that an online course offers students, particularly the ability to fit the course into their busy schedules, Romero decided to make the leap, but only with a course that offered some individual face-to-face contact with students—a practicum and seminar for early childhood education. In this course, students teach 12 hours per week and receive three supervisory visits during the semester.

In the face-to-face version of the seminar, students meet for a couple of hours each week for mini-lectures and discussions; Romero designed the online course to be conducted similarly. By the time they take the seminar, “students have taken most of their content courses already, so I don’t have to provide a huge amount of content. It’s just helping them bring it all together,” Romero says.

Appearance

Romero was deliberate in making her online course “real” without being too complicated. She created a look to the course that matched the physical appearance of the education environments her students work in. The first thing they see when they enter the course site is a red schoolhouse with a flag waving and a bell ringing.

In addition to creating a familiar look, Romero designed her course so that each week’s materials have

a consistent font and color. “This provides a visual link that brings things...together. It takes a little extra time, but students notice it and they [know] where they are when they’re entering different parts of the course,” Romero says.

Discussion

Contrary to the students’ fears, they had more discussion in the online course than students in the face-to-face classroom did. Romero credits this largely to the introductions in the threaded discussion, which emphasize the students’ common experiences.

In the threaded-discussion introductions, Romero asks students to talk about their teaching goals, their practicum classrooms, and personal information (if they are willing).

“I think having shared experiences is really the key to successful online teaching. Anything you do, any assignment that gets people out doing something...establishes that common connection,” Romero says.

In her course, finding these common experiences is easy. Doing it in other types of courses is possible with a little creativity. For example, a colleague of Romero’s was teaching a course to a group of diverse, geographically dispersed students. Romero suggested having them each take a field trip to a similar place—in this case a library. Each would go to a different library but all would be able to bring that similar experience back to the class and discuss the differences and commonalities.

“I think you can create something artificial to achieve that common experience, even if it’s not a common practicum experience,” Romero says.

Tone

One of the limitations of interacting in threaded discussions is the potential of misinterpreting intentions. If you say something sarcastic in a face-to-face class, students will likely understand your intention.

Romero is careful to guard against posting things that might be misinterpreted. The downside to this is a lack of spontaneity. On the other hand, Romero finds that she is more disciplined and less inclined to go off on tangents when she is online than when in the face-to-face classroom.

In the excitement of that engagement in the classroom, you can get carried away. I’m more responsible about that when I’m online, Romero says.

Romero uses the design of the course to set the tone as well. For example, initially, students often get lost in the online space, and she tries to make sure that doesn’t happen by leaving messages for them in the places they might look, reminding them where to go.

In some instances, Romero includes an animated cheerleader in the site to indicate that students have found what they were looking for. “You establish tone through those kinds of messages that are actually part of the design of the physical environment,” Romero says.

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times when composing various documents for my students, but they also offer a nice “bank” of websites and information at the ready to send to students when needed. This allows for a more complete, thorough, and responsive instructor.

Proofread, PROOFread, PROOFREAD. No matter how scholarly you might be, no matter how good a writer you might be, nothing waters down the credibility and professionalism of your writing—and thus, of you—quicker than poor proofreading. Take the time to read over your writing before sending it on—it can make a huge difference.

Don't forget about color and visuals. Using color in your fonts to stress importance, whimsy, humor, or clarity sometimes (don't overdo it

to the point where its effect is lost) can help liven up your writing, and thus the course. Also, the use of visuals—pictures, cartoons, graphs, etc.—can often go long way in explaining or emphasizing a piece of information, while giving a bit more life to your writing.

Communicate often. This is perhaps most important—communicating with your online students regularly will keep them connected, involved, and engaged, while also constantly reminding them that, yes, you are not only real, but you also really give a damn about the course.

REMEMBER: Don't buy your writing at Dollar General, but rather tailor it to fit your class. There's nothing like an online course with well-dressed words from the instructor.

Please let me hear from you, by sending along suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at errolcraigsull@aol.com. And, as always, with each of my columns, I offer a sampling of whatever subject I've discussed; for this column, if you'd like a copy of my “Total Guide to Perfect Proofreading,” just send me an e-mail!

*Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 12 years and has a national reputation as an online instructor—writing and conducting workshops on his profession. He is currently finishing his next book, which is a collection of his online teaching activities titled, *Pebbles: A Most Unusual Approach to Very Effective Writing*. @*

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- **Ask for students' undivided attention.** Online learners often balance many responsibilities and can get distracted during synchronous chats. Ask that they focus exclusively on the chat. This will improve the quality of the interaction and help students get the most out of the sessions.
- **Form study groups.** Group chats are an excellent way for students to make connections with each other. Encourage them to continue their chats in groups or one on one.
- **IM your students.** Isolation is one of the dangers of online learning. Simple, synchronous messages from the instructor can open up communication and encourage students.
- **Invite students to IM you.** Because you are on their buddy lists, students will be able to tell when you are online (as long as you have your IM application open). This open line of synchronous communication can be an excellent way of holding online office hours.
- **Establish realistic expectations.** Increased access to the instructor can foster unrealistic expectations. For example, just because students are able to communicate with you synchronously does not mean that they will get their graded assignments back any sooner. Explain your communication policies clearly in your syllabus.
- **Don't micromanage.** Like the private conversations that take place among students before and after face-to-face classes, IM can be an informal form of communication that can help students learn and provide social connections that might not otherwise be available in the course.
- **Keep a chat log.** Not everyone can be available for synchronous sessions, but they can still benefit from transcripts of the communication that occurs in these sessions. @