

ENHANCING STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND COURSE OUTCOMES IN ONLINE GRADUATE COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Student engagement and enhancement of learning is a bigger challenge in online courses than in the traditional face-to-face classes. This study presents some taxonomies, frameworks, theories, and models that help us to understand various stages of learning and the changing roles of instructors and students as online instruction has become more prevalent over time. Some methods for enhancing student learning and course outcomes are presented here for online graduate courses. In particular, the authors find the use of templates, assessment rubrics, meaningful and professionally relevant projects, sample projects, sample assignments, and timely feedback to be very helpful in facilitating students' participation and learning and in improving course outcomes. These tools and techniques should also enhance traditional classroom-based instruction as well.

INTRODUCTION

In the traditional face-to-face settings, education is typically instructor-led while in online settings, the instructor becomes a facilitator of learning and education becomes learner-focused who play the central role in knowledge acquisition through participative, active learning (Rena & Pratt, 2007). As outcome-focused instruction has become prominent, it is helpful to provide templates and samples of assignments and projects along with their assessment rubrics to students so they would know what they are expected to produce and how their product will be evaluated by the instructor. These tools clarify instructor expectations and improve students' participation and outcomes. Rubric-based discussions are richer and more fulfilling for students than discussions without such rubrics.

There is an old saying: "Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand." The Bloom's revised taxonomy extends it by adding: applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. A review of literature produces several theoretical models of teaching and learning that are relevant in settings that utilize text, sound, video, and 3D virtual worlds. These models provide a comprehensive theoretical background to enhance student engagement and course outcomes in online and traditional education.

Purpose and Scope

This study focuses on the online setting and methods for enhancing student learning and course outcomes. The authors discuss the use of numerous techniques, especially, templates and assessment rubrics, to facilitate students' learning and to improve course outcomes. The use of

these techniques is discussed in specific MBA courses that were taught at a regional private university in the Northeastern United States. We provide several templates and rubrics that are utilized by our instructors and summarize students' reflective end-of-term assessment for such tools and techniques that improve course outcomes. A checklist for improving online instruction is also presented at the end. While this study focuses on online education, the concepts, tools, and techniques presented here should be equally relevant for the traditional classroom settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on education and learning provides various theories, models, and perspectives. We present here significant taxonomies, frameworks, theories, and models that help us to understand the various stages of learning and the changing roles of instructors and students as online instruction became more prominent.

Crumpacker (2001) indicated that distance education students desired access to learning unconstrained by time and place and instructors desired face-to-face interaction with students. The desires of these two entities could be fulfilled by collaborative, problem-based asynchronous course designs that optimally balanced structure and dialog. Asynchronous Learning Networks fulfilled students' desire for flexibility, while collaborative, problem-based designs met instructors' need for interaction. He noted that compared with traditional course delivery, such a "compromise" design delivered comparable quality of education and outcomes. The quality of distance education could be significantly related to instructor motivation, skills and pedagogical approach that was learner-centered, collaborative, and problem-based in an asynchronous setting. He also noted that faculty training and development was critical for success of distance education programs.

Taxonomies of Objectives, Learning, and Assessing

Bloom (1956) introduced his taxonomy of learning objectives in the cognitive (knowledge), affective (attitude), and psychomotor (motor skills) domains. The six levels of learning objectives in his cognitive domain are listed here from the lowest to the highest order: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Anderson et al. (2001) modified Bloom's taxonomy from nouns to "action" verbs to identify six categories of learning, teaching, and assessing. These categories are listed here from the lowest to the highest order: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. They add "create new knowledge" as the highest level on top of Bloom's cognitive taxonomy.

Constructivism

Molka-Danielsen (2009) summarized the three fundamental concepts of Vygotsky's Social Constructivist theory of learning (1978) as follows:

1. Reality does not pre-exist but is constructed through human activity (Kukla, 2000).
2. Knowledge is socially and culturally constructed through human actions.
3. Learning occurs when individuals participate in social activities.

Taylor & Maor (2000) developed the Constructivist On-Line Learning Environment Survey (COLLES) to help assess the quality of an online learning environment from a social

constructivist perspective. This instrument consists of 24 questions (actual and preferred) that are arranged into 6 scales that they define as follows:

1. Relevance - how relevant is online learning to students' professional practices?
2. Reflection - does on-line learning stimulate students' critical reflective thinking?
3. Interactivity - to what extent do students engage online in rich educative dialogue?
4. Tutor Support – how well do tutors enable students to participate in online learning?
5. Peer Support – do fellow students provide sensitive and encouraging support?
6. Interpretation – do students and tutors make good sense of each other's communications?

Dougiamas & Taylor (2002) utilized the COLLES instrument to evaluate the quality of learning in a 14-week online course that was taught in Moodle. The findings of their study were mostly supportive of their goals. Based on this study they developed additional hypotheses and research questions for future research. It is interesting to note that the lead author of this study, Martin Dougiamas, wrote the Moodle software to facilitate online education, and then made Moodle an Open Source Virtual Environment for Learning/Course Management.

Changing Roles of Instructors and Students in Online Settings

Along with a change of setting in online education, the traditional roles of educators and learners are also changing. These changing roles are nicely summarized by Collins & Berge (1996) as follows:

Changing Roles of Instructors	Changing Roles of Students
1. From oracle and lecturer to consultant, guide, and resource provider	1. From passive receptacles for hand-me-down knowledge to constructors of their own knowledge
2. Teachers become expert questioners, rather than providers of answers	2. Students become complex problem-solvers rather than just memorizers of facts
3. Teachers become designers of learning student experiences rather than just providers of content	3. Students see topics from multiple perspectives
4. Teachers provide the initial structure to student work, encouraging increasing self-direction	4. Students refine their own questions and search for their own answers
5. Teacher presents multiple perspectives on topics, emphasizing the salient points	5. Students work as group members on more collaborative/cooperative assignments; group interaction significantly increased
6. From a solitary teacher to a member of a learning team (reduces isolation sometimes experienced by teachers)	6. Increased multi-cultural awareness
7. From teacher having total autonomy to activities that can be broadly assessed	7. Students work toward fluency with the same tools as professionals in their field
8. From total control of the teaching environment to sharing with the student as fellow learner	8. More emphasis on students as autonomous, independent, self-motivated managers of their own time and learning process
9. More emphasis on sensitivity to student learning styles	9. Discussion of students' own work in the classroom
10. Teacher-learner power structures erode	10. Emphasis on knowledge use rather than only observation of the teacher's expert performance or just learning to "pass the test"
	11. Emphasis on acquiring learning strategies (both individually and collaboratively)
	12. Access to resources is significantly expanded
	13. Reality does not pre-exist but is constructed through human activity (Kukla, 2000).
	14. Knowledge is socially and culturally constructed through human actions.
	15. Learning occurs when individuals participate in social activities.

Models of Online Teaching and Learning

Next, we briefly present four models of online instruction and learning that focus on the setting and functions of various participants in online education and learning process.

Collins & Berge (1996) provided four tasks and functions of an online instructor:

1. Social function. Promote a friendly social environment.
2. Managerial function. Set norms, agenda, pacing, etc.
3. Pedagogical function. Educational facilitation.
4. Technical function. Assist students in learning the use of technology for online education.
5. Outcomes. Empowered learners, guided discussion, increased student-to-student discussion.

Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000) presented the following functions of an online instructor:

1. Social presence. Open communication, group cohesion.
2. Teaching presence. Course design, facilitation and assessment, instruction.
3. Cognitive. Construction of meaning through sustained communication.
4. Outcomes. Co-constructed meaning, critical thinking.

Rena & Pratt (2007) presented the following functions of online instructors:

1. People. Students and instructional teams, social presence, interaction and communication.
2. Purpose. Establishing guidelines, shared goals, and practical considerations to manage teams.
3. Process. Interaction, communication, collaboration, reflection, learning, teamwork, social constructivist context.
4. Outcomes. Co-created knowledge and meaning, reflection, transformation, increased self-direction, reinforcement of presence.

Building upon the taxonomies of objectives, learning, and assessing, Salomon (2004) provided a Five-Step Online Learning Model that included technical support and e-moderating aspects for each step. This model can be summarized as follows (Deutschmann, 2009):

1. Access and Motivation.
 - a. Technical Support - Setting up and accessing system.
 - b. E-Moderating - Welcoming and encouraging.
2. Online Socialization.
 - a. Technical Support - Sending and receiving messages.
 - b. E-Moderating - Familiarizing and providing bridges between cultural, social, and learning environments.
3. Information Exchange.
 - a. Technical Support - Searching, personalizing software.
 - b. E-Moderating - Facilitating tasks and supporting use of learning materials.
4. Knowledge Construction.
 - a. Technical Support - Conferencing.
 - b. E-Moderating - Facilitating process.
5. Development.
 - a. Technical Support - Providing links outside closed conferences.
 - b. E-Moderating - Supporting and responding.

Rena & Pratt (2007) note that in the traditional face-to-face setting, the instructor generally plays the role of an expert imparting knowledge to willing learners. However, in an

online setting, the role of an instructor becomes that of a facilitator of learning who provides a general framework and guidance for the course allowing the students to explore the course material and other material. They further note (on p. 22) that the “keys to the creation of a learning community and successful facilitation online are simple: honesty, responsiveness, relevance, respect, openness, and empowerment.” When faculty create online learning environments with these characteristics then students engage in active, rich online discussion without fear of retribution.

Enhanced Online Setting in a 3D Virtual World

Online 3D Virtual Worlds like *OpenSim* and Second Life (SL) offer rich opportunities for enhanced teaching and learning. Simulation Linked Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (SLOODLE) is an open source platform that connects Moodle, a Learning Management System, with a 3D Virtual World like *OpenSim* or SL and offers several tools for enhanced teaching and learning experience. SLOODLE can be accessed here: <https://www.sloodle.org/>.

Dubas & Hill (2013) presented guidelines for enhanced meetings and presentations in SL. Dubas, Pressley, Tavakoli & Miah (2014) discussed various tools to improve online student engagement and course outcomes by utilizing a Learning Management System like Blackboard and a 3D virtual world like SL. Salmon, Nie & Edirisingha (2010) applied the five-stage learning model (Salomon 2004) using SL and concluded that “using a structured model for scaffolding learning in groups has value in 3D MUVES such as SL as well as in text-based asynchronous environments, to ensure that for learners, and teachers, confidence in the environment and in each other builds up in a productive way. The basic structure appears to hold good...” These authors continue to research into the use of SL and the social scaffolding of learning in SL with campus-based and online educational settings and their findings are available at these two sites:

1. Delivering University Curricula: Knowledge, Learning, and Innovation Gains (DUCKLING) at http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/beyond-distance-research-alliance/projects/duckling?uol_r=f5d83a92
2. Second World Immersive Future Teaching (SWIFT) at http://www2.le.ac.uk/projects/swift?uol_r=8ebb16af

STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND DISCUSSION IN ONLINE MBA COURSES

Managerial Accounting Course

In accounting, it is necessary for students to apply that which is learned. As such, in discussion forums students must demonstrate a certain degree of critical thought as well as quantitative analysis. One of the most useful skills for graduate students is the ability to read and evaluate financial statements and audit reports of publicly-held companies. During the seven weeks of ACC 610, Managerial Accounting, they must evaluate the performance of a firm through a series of discussion questions (the sum of which is referred to as a “case”) and using techniques practiced throughout the course.

An MBA course at this private university may be as small as three students or as large as 25. With a class size of less than six, every student must complete each assignment for his/her own company. Classes of six or more are divided into three teams. Cases rotate among teams

every two weeks, and during week 7, each team submits a summary report, including questions and answers, of the company they had in weeks 1 and 2. As a result, each team evaluates at the end of the course its respective members, and teams evaluate the work of one another three times, at the end of weeks 2, 4, and 6. At the end of the course, everyone will have been forced to review all parts of the case. During week 7, each team will provide a summary of their initial case.

This continuous case discussed throughout an online forum counts 20% of the course grade. Team ratings will compose 10% and individual ratings 10%. The summary in week 7 is worth 5%. This continuous case is described in Table 2.

Table 2	
CONTINUOUS CASE FOR THE DURATION OF THE SEMESTER - ACC 610	
Week	Assignment
1	This is the first of a series of exercises in which you will prepare an analysis of a publicly- traded company. Select a company for this case. Familiarize yourselves with this company by accessing its website, obtaining and reviewing its annual report.
2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Graph the company's daily stock price over the last three years. Identify major news events affecting your company over this period. Relate price movements to these events. 2. Prepare a business analysis for your company.
3	Obtain the financial statements for your company. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Confirm that the firm's income, dividends, and other capital transactions explain the change in equity for the most recent year. 2. Confirm that the firm's cash flow statement begins with the same net income amounts found in the income statement. 3. Confirm that the firm's cash flow statement shows a change in cash that is equal to the difference between cash shown on the balance sheet at the beginning and end of the year. Does your company have any special items? What are they? Do you expect them to recur? Do they tell you anything about the business situation?
4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What depreciation methods does the firm use? Have there been any changes? 2. What inventory methods does the firm use? Have there been any changes? 3. Does your firm have any significant contingent liabilities? 4. Does your firm have any equity method investments? What are they?
5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does your firm have any minority interest (non-controlling interest)? 2. Review the historical cash flow statement. Are there any large reconciling items? What are they? What does this information tell you? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does your firm have an unqualified, clean audit opinion? If not, what was the exception? 2. How would management choices, estimates, and judgment affect the financial statements?
6	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prepare a trend analysis of operating ratios over 3 years. 2. Use any other information in your company's annual report to explain the change in revenues, gross margin percentage, and operating margin percentage. 3. Find another company in the same industry and calculate three years of operating ratios for this company. Compare the competitor's ratios to your company's ratios. Explain the similarities and differences between the ratios.
7	Summarize the findings of your original company.

In accounting, practice may not mean performance is perfect, however, students at a minimum, get better through the process. By answering questions, reviewing the work of others, making corrections and summarizing results, understanding is achieved. Everyday application of the material makes it more meaningful and emphasizes the importance of why learning it is important.

Table 3 provides the grading rubric while team evaluation and student evaluation forms are given in Tables 4 and 5 respectively

Table 3				
GRADING RUBRIC – POSTED FOR CLASS - ACC 610				
Objective – This case provides a practical application of financial statement analysis.				
EXPECTATIONS	Highly competent (4)	Competent (3)	Marginally competent (2)	Less than competent (1)
Identification of the Primary Questions	Identifies and understands all of the main questions	Identifies and understands most of the main questions	Identifies and understands some of the questions	Identifies and understands few of the questions
Analysis of the Problem	Insightful and thorough analysis of all the questions	Thorough analysis of most of the questions	Superficial analysis of some of the questions	Incomplete analysis of the questions
Correct Calculations	Correct calculations	Correct calculations with the exception of minor (careless) mistakes	Calculations involving several mistakes	Incomplete or mostly inaccurate calculations
Comments on Calculated Values (ratios/rates/trends/graphs)	Well documented, reasoned and appropriate comments to all questions	Appropriate, well thought out comments about solutions to most of the problems	Superficial and/or inappropriate solutions to some of the problems/questions	Little or no action suggested, and/or inappropriate solutions to all of the problems/questions
Links to Course Readings and Additional Research	Excellent research into the issues with clearly documents links to class and/or outside readings	Good research and documented links to the material read throughout the course	Limited research and documented links to any readings	Incomplete research and links to any readings

Table 4		
TEAM EVALUATION FORM – ACC 610		
to be Completed at the End Of Weeks 2, 4, and 6 by Each Team		
Instructions: Enter the name of the team being evaluated in the table below. Then rate each team's answers to the questions between 1 and 4, according to the grading rubric.		
Team/Company being Evaluated: _____		
Week: _____		
Student (Evaluator): _____		
*e.g., Team 1 students will evaluate teams 2 and 3; team 2 students will evaluate teams 1 and 3; team 3 students will evaluate teams 1 and 2. The ratings at the end of week 2 will be averaged, likewise weeks 4 and 6.		
Grading Components	Rating (1-4)	Comments
Identification of the Primary Questions		
Analysis of the Problem		
Correct Calculations		
Comments on Calculated Values (ratios/rates/trends/graphs)		
Links to Course Readings and Additional Research		

Table 5		
STUDENT EVALUATION FORM – ACC 610		
Instructions: Enter your name and teammates' names in the table below. Then rate each person's participation in the discussion forum continuous case between 1 and 5. If your team member did his or her fair share, give them a 5. A rating of 1 indicates the team member did not contribute to the project.		
Your Name: _____		
Team/Company: _____		
Teammate Name	Rating (1-10)	Comments

Business Law and Business Ethics Courses

The discussion forums in Business Law and Business Ethics are not graded separately. They are incorporated into a grade for a weekly team assignment wherein the discussion forums are used by team members to complete the weekly assignment. There are 5 online discussion forums that are used to generate a final Word document product to be submitted as a team. There is also a 6th assignment that requires each team member to evaluate the other members of their team. This requires no discussion, but is also part of the team discussion grade. This is worth 5 % of the total grade. The grade value for each weekly team project is 4 % for a total of 20 % of the overall grade in the course.

The project requires the team to evaluate a particular case or set of readings, legally analyze the case or readings, and develop a business action plan based upon the legal implications and analysis.

Students are graded on their performance as a team and as an individual each week. The assignment is graded in relation to the depth and breadth of the submission as well as taking into consideration the depth and breadth of the online discussion among group members to complete the assignment.

By utilizing team discussion forums, and then comparing them to the team member evaluation forms at the end of the semester, the professor is able to weekly evaluate student engagement in the assignment as follows:

1. Has the student participated in the discussion forum? At what frequency?
2. At what point in the week did the student begin posting?
3. In relation to other team member posts, is the student submitting a fair amount of work?
4. Is the student post administrative or academic?
 - a. Administrative – Setting up completion schedule, designating team member tasks, reasons/excuses for lack of participation, getting other students involved or trying to get other students to participate.
 - b. Academic - Providing critical analysis related to the assigned cases and readings, providing strategic suggestions for the team to consider.

The following team member evaluation is used in the course.

Table 6
TEAM MEMBER EVALUATION FORM – BUS 620 & BUS 630

Please, evaluate every team member based upon your experiences in your team over the past six weeks.

YOUR NAME: _____

Team Member 1: _____

Team Member 2: _____

Team Member 3: _____

Team Member 4: _____

Please rate your fellow students/colleagues using the following scale:
5 – exceptional, **4** – above average, **3** – average, **2** – below average, **1** – barely meets expectations, **0** – not enough participation to rate

No.	Evaluation Area	Team Member 1	Team Member 2	Team Member 3	Team Member 4
1	Participation level in Online Discussions to complete the assignment.				
2	Easy to include in group work. 5 means very easy.				
3	Participated in a timely manner and in a way that participation contributed to the final submission.				
4	Collaborative behavior with fellow team members.				
5	Team member shows respect and willingness to work with the team members.				
6	Team member provided original suggestions or ideas for completion and/or additions to the project.				
7	Team member allowed all members to participate in the group project.				
8	Team member's comments and participation displayed an understanding of ethical concepts, terms, and theories from the readings.				
9	Team member displayed the willingness to learn and develop ethical decision-making skills.				
10	Team member communicated effectively.				
11	Ability to identify, work through, and solve ethical issues presented in the assignment.				
	TOTAL SCORE (Average times 2)				

Instructors should incorporate discussion forums into concrete assignments so there should be something that the student can turn in. In our Business Ethics and Business Law classes, the discussion forums are tied to completed assignment grades. In our Business Law course, the discussion forum performance is evaluated in relation to a weekly team case/reading analysis.

Marketing Management Course

This course requires two books: a *Marketing Management* textbook and a *Marketing Plan Handbook*. Students take five online exams based on the *Marketing Management* textbook and work in their groups to write a marketing plan. Their marketing plans are developed by writing five weekly assignment reports that constitute sections of their marketing plans. Students are provided templates and assessment rubrics for each weekly assignment and for the marketing plans. In addition, they are provided sample marketing plans written by previous student teams in

this course. Student teams select and get approved their marketing plan topics during the first two weeks of class, and then complete their marketing plans over the remaining five weeks.

Each week, students work within their teams to develop and submit a section of their marketing plans by using its template and then evaluate it by using its assessment rubric. The group leaders submit their weekly assignment reports, their completed assessment rubrics, and Team Evaluation Forms to their instructor on Fridays. Other students also submit Team Evaluation Forms to their instructor. On Fridays, the team leaders also post their assignment reports in an online discussion forum for across group discussion to improve other groups' reports on Saturdays and Sundays. The instructor evaluates this across group discussion by using A Rubric to Assess Students' Participation in Online Discussion on Assignments that is also provided to students at the start of the semester.

Each week, the instructor provides comments on weekly assignment reports and also completes the assignment assessment rubric using the same form that was completed and sent to the instructor. Both the weekly assignment reports and the assessment rubric including the instructor's remarks are returned to their respective teams. This timely feedback by the instructor is critical in keeping students on the right track and for superior course outcomes.

The textbook and marketing plan handbook should be carefully selected and the syllabus and the course itself should be carefully designed and continuously improved based on students' comments. At the end of the seven-week semester, the students are invited to engage in a reflective assessment of this course to provide feedback about all aspects of this course. We present, here, a summary of end-of-term reflective assessment of Marketing Management course by students in various sections of this course. Some templates and assessment rubrics utilized in this course are presented in appendices.

Course Syllabus

The syllabus and the course were well developed and did not require a change.

Textbook

Students indicated that the textbook used in this course was a great tool for the class.

Quizzes

There are five quizzes with multiple-choice exams and each quiz lasts two hours. These quizzes are available online over several days each week. Students felt that these quizzes were straightforward though lengthy after a long day of work at their companies.

Marketing Plan Handbook

Students indicated that this Handbook was fairly simple to understand and use; it was a great tool for the class and it offered great examples as to how to do the plan and led students in the right direction when writing the plan.

Sample Marketing Plans

Students found these to be very helpful.

Templates

The templates were very helpful and gave specific guideline to follow that helped in the completion of the plan.

Rubrics

The rubrics helped to facilitate more discussion and improved upon students' understanding of what was expected from them.

Marketing Plan

These projects should present real life experiences that students would be able to use in their professional careers. They noted that the marketing plan challenged them to keep thinking and required a lot of work but it was interesting and they learned a lot about marketing and the product they did their research on.

Group Size

The group size should be large enough to make workload manageable. We have increased group size from five to seven to make sure that a group can rotate leaders on a weekly basis.

Number of Groups

One section of this course had only one group of five students thus there was no across group discussion. Across group discussion has been quite rich when there are three or four groups.

Timely Feedback

The instructor should offer timely advice and suggestions. Students appreciated the timely responses to any questions or emails to their instructor. It is very important to grade student work and provide feedback in a timely fashion.

Discussion Forums

1. Within group discussion forums. These forums helped students to collaboratively write assignment reports and the marketing plan.
2. Across group discussion forums. These forums helped students as they provided comments to other teams' assignments reports and defended their own assignment reports.
3. Students liked being able to share with other classmates and to get an objective opinion on the marketing plan. Every new person that read the plan added new comments or suggestions not thought of by others. This helped the team consider new ideas.
4. The discussion forums gave students the opportunity to communicate as a team, as well as review other teams' projects and provide them with thoughts and questions that students hoped would assist them. The majority of questions presented to a team allowed it to pursue additional resources and other ideas that it may have otherwise missed.
5. Students noted that the discussion forums allowed them to keep up constant communication throughout the week. The forums allowed them to see everything that had been written and suggested on the same page. It made it easier to keep up with information and less likely to miss something important.

The Workload

The workload should be meaningful; avoid "busy" work. Students noted that working on their marketing plans was very meaningful since this assignment was directly related to the subject matter of the course and

they learned a great deal. They would rather do an assignment like this than spend hours upon hours working on busy work that feels unrelated to the course.

Teamwork

Most students were very satisfied with their teams and appreciated that each team member pulled their own weight appropriately and developed a phenomenal plan. Such teams would discuss the plan early in the week so they could complete their assignments by Friday. Some students noted that it was difficult dealing with team members that did not do their part which caused more work at the last minute for other team members.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Online teaching and learning requires tools and techniques that were not often utilized in the traditional face-to-face courses. The roles of instructors and students have been changing across course delivery formats. The traditional face-to-face instruction is often instructor-centered implying that the instructor is “A sage on the stage,” while in online settings learning is more learner-centered and the instructor often plays the role of “A guide by the side.”

Group discussion enhances students’ learning experience and for a rich discussion there should be about five or more students per group. Also, there should be more than one group per class to support rich discussion across groups. The instructor should provide prompt and detailed feedback to student’s assignments to keep them on track. Use of templates and assessment rubrics provides guidance to students and keeps learning and assessment organized. Since there is an increased focus now on outcome-based learning, the use of templates and assessment rubrics cannot be over emphasized, especially for online courses. Each online learning management system provides its own tools and techniques for teaching and learning management and these tools can be enhanced by utilizing tools like templates, assessment rubrics, group discussion, weekly reports, and instructor feedback to improve student engagement and course outcomes.

The students’ responses to a survey on reflective evaluation of a Marketing Management course indicate that a well-designed course that utilizes templates and assessment rubrics, along with an appropriate technological support system, and timely guidance and feedback by the instructor can provide rich learning outcomes for students. Future researchers should replicate the findings of this study to provide additional support in improving online education and learning. This study should also be replicated in a 3D Virtual World setting, especially one utilizing SLOODLE that integrated Moodle with *OpenSim* or *SL*, to provide a richer interaction among the participants through text, voice and face-to-face interaction among the avatars of the students and their instructors.

Future researcher should also build well developed and tested templates and assessment rubrics for specific courses and those templates and rubrics should be made available to other instructors so they could enhance teaching and learning outcomes of their online courses.

For richer communication, the group size and the number of groups per course is very important. We have learned that there should be five or more students per group and there should be three to five groups in a class for meaningful and manageable discussion. The workload may become excessive with too few students per group and the quality of across group discussion is likely to suffer with too many or too few groups.

A key to engaging students in an online discussion forum parallels two dimensions with which instructors are already familiar vis-à-vis the in-class modality: dialogue that adds to the discussion and incorporates feedback that contributes to the conversation.

As an online instructor, offer a positive comment that reinforces the student's contribution to the online dialogue then use the student's contribution as a lead-in to insights that you, the subject matter expert, have to share. Reserve constructive feedback, if any, until the end; presented as a suggestion – in both tone and context – that the student may employ to enhance or bolster their contribution. Such a discussion forum “sandwich” accomplishes the goals of offering feedback, contributing to the online discussion, bolstering student confidence, and enhancing the online learning experience.

The online learning experience is enhanced via establishing and adhering to expectations of students who participate in the online discussion forum. One way to communicate discussion forum expectations is via a well-articulated rubric, which should be made available to student at the start of the course. In addition to a rubric, clearly present the expectations for the weekly discussion forum in the course syllabus. Finally, reinforce the expectations in the prelude/introduction of the week's discussion forum. Moreover, expectations should adhere to SMART performance-management goal-setting principles: specific (substantive), measurable (word count, rubric and number of posts), achievable, relevant (applicable to the subject matter), and timely (by defined deadlines: first discussion forum post is due by midnight on Wednesday with two additional posts made in response to classmates' contribution by midnight on Sunday).

Finally, we present below a checklist to enhance student participation and performance:

1. Provide sample assignments and projects written by previous students in a course.
2. Provide meaningful and challenging assignments and projects that should provide students with a real world experience that they can use in their professional lives.
3. Provide templates for assignments and projects.
4. Provide assessment rubrics for assignments and projects.
5. Provide a forum and a template to guide online discussion within and across student teams.
6. Avoid “busy” work that is not related to the course or to the students' professional careers.
7. Determine the types and number of manageable online discussion forums that are required in a course.
8. Determine the grade value of these online discussion forums in the overall course grade.
9. Provide guidelines to students to encourage better performance in online discussion forums.
10. Share with students the assessment rubric that the instructor will use to evaluate online discussion forums.
11. Provide timely and constructive feedback and evaluation of assignments and discussion forums.

APPENDICES

Here, we present one of several templates and four of several assessment rubrics that are used in our Marketing Management course. These can be modified and adapted by others for use in business courses.

1. **Appendix A.** A Template for Tactics Assignment
2. **Appendix B.** An Assessment Rubric for Tactics Assignment
3. **Appendix C.** A Team Evaluation Form
4. **Appendix D.** An Assessment Rubric for Participation in Online Discussion Assignments.
5. **Appendix E.** Assessment Rubric for A Marketing Plan

Appendix A

A TEMPLATE FOR TACTICS ASSIGNMENT – MKT 640

Designing the Tactics (or Marketing Mix): (Chernev, *Marketing Plan Handbook*, Chapters 8, 13, & 14)

To execute a given strategy, provide tactics that translate the desired strategy into a specific set of actions. Outline the key aspects of the offering's marketing mix. Use the D-C-D framework of designing, communicating, and delivering value through seven key elements:

Product

Define relevant product characteristics (attributes, benefits, and costs). The key product aspects of the offering – performance, consistency, reliability, durability, compatibility, ease of use, technological design, degree of customization, form, style, and packaging.

Service

Identify relevant service characteristics (attributes, benefits, and costs). Product support, customer service, personnel selection and training. Service provided to customers, collaborators, and the company personnel.

Brand

Determine the key elements of brand identity (name, logo, symbol, slogan, jingle, and packaging) and the meaning of the offering's brand associations such as emotional benefits, social benefits, and self-expressive benefits.

Price

Identify the price(s) at which the offering is provided to customers and channel members.

Incentives

Incentives enhance the value of the offering by providing additional benefits and/or by reducing costs. Discuss monetary and non-monetary incentives. Define the incentives offered to customers (e.g., price reductions), collaborators (e.g., trade allowances), and company personnel (e.g., bonuses). Identify any proposed changes in the incentives.

Communications

Inform the target customers about the offering and its characteristics. Discuss six key decisions about communication: goal, message, media, creative solution, implementation, and evaluation. The message may emphasize any of the marketing mix elements (product, service, brand, price, incentives, and distribution). Identify the manner in which the key aspects of the offering (i.e., product, service, brand, price, and incentives) are communicated to target customers, collaborators, and company personnel and stakeholders.

Distribution

Distribution captures the channel through which the offering is delivered to customers. Describe the manner in which the key aspects of the offering are delivered to target customers, collaborators, and company personnel and stakeholders. Discuss decisions regarding channel structure, channel coordination, channel type, channel coverage, and channel exclusivity.

Appendix B AN ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FOR TACTICS ASSIGNMENT			
Instructor: _____ Course: MKT 640. Group Name: _____			
The desired outcome that the company is trying to achieve. _____.			
Evaluation Scale: A (Excellent) = 93-100, A- = 90-92, B+ (Good) = 87-89, B=83-86, B- = 80-82, C+ (Fair) = 77-79, C = 70-76, D (Poor) = 60-69, and F (Not Acceptable) = 0-59.			
Category	Description	Assessment by Group Leader	Assessment by Instructor
1. Product	Define relevant product characteristics (attributes, benefits, and costs). The key product aspects of the offering – performance, consistency, reliability, durability, compatibility, ease of use, technological design, degree of customization, form, style, and packaging.		
2. Service	Identify relevant service characteristics (attributes, benefits, and costs). Product support, customer service, personnel selection and training. Service provided to customers, collaborators, and the company personnel.		
3. Brand	Determine the key elements of brand identity (name, logo, symbol, slogan, jingle, and packaging) and the meaning of the offering's brand associations such as emotional benefits, social benefits, and self-expressive benefits.		
4. Price.	Identify the price(s) at which the offering is provided to customers and channel members.		
5. Incentives	Incentives enhance the value of the offering by providing additional benefits and/or by reducing costs. Discuss monetary and non-monetary incentives. Define the incentives offered to customers (e.g., price reductions), collaborators (e.g., trade allowances), and company personnel (e.g., bonuses). Identify any proposed changes in the incentives.		
6. Communications	Inform the target customers about the offering and its characteristics. Discuss six key decisions about communication: goal, message, media, creative solution, implementation, and evaluation. The message may emphasize any of the marketing mix elements (product, service, brand, price, incentives, and distribution). Identify the manner in which the key aspects of the offering (i.e., product, service, brand, price, and incentives) are communicated to target customers, collaborators, and company personnel and stakeholders.		
7. Distribution	Distribution captures the channel through which the offering is delivered to customers. Describe the manner in which the key aspects of the offering are delivered to target customers, collaborators, and company personnel and stakeholders. Discuss decisions regarding channel structure, channel coordination, channel type, channel coverage, and channel exclusivity.		

Appendix C		
A TEAM EVALUATION FORM - MKT 640		
Instructions: Rate each team members' participation in the assignment between 1 and 10. A rating of 1 indicates the team member did not contribute to the project while a 10 indicates that your team member did his or her fair share. A rating of 5 indicates that the team member did half the expected work. Do not rate yourself.		
Assignment: _____		
Your Name: _____		
Team Leader: _____		
Team Name: _____		
Teammate Name	Rating (1-10)	Comments

Appendix D				
AN ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FOR PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE DISCUSSION				
ASSIGNMENTS - MKT 640				
#	Items	Poor	Good	Excellent
1	Posted main topic (assignment under discussion) information only.	X		
2	Posted main topic information and more than one response.		X	X
3	No depth of presentation, no research base, opinion only.	X		
4	Comments were barely related to main discussion question and/or other student posting.	X		
5	No constructive comments to help class discussion.	X		
6	Postings were poorly written.	X		
7	Posted within a couple of hours of the deadline.	X		
8	Posted at least twice per week.		X	X
9	Responses were not limited to "I agree" or "great idea" but were supported with examples from personal and professional experiences.		X	X
10	Postings demonstrated a knowledge and understanding of assigned readings from both textbooks (Kotler & Keller and Chernev).		X	X
11	Referenced other research, gave examples, and evoked follow-up responses from other students.		X	X
12	Enhanced quality of discussion (i.e., illustrated a point with examples, suggested new perspectives on issues, asked questions that helped further discussion, cited current news events etc.)		X	
13	Substantially enhanced quality of discussion (i.e., illustrated a point with examples, suggested new perspectives on issues, asked questions that helped further discussion, cited current news events, etc.)			X
14	Replied to several other student postings and provided relevant responses and constructive feedback to the student.		X	
15	Replied to several other student postings on a regular basis and provided relevant responses and constructive feedback to the student posting.			X
16	Postings were well-written, incorporating proper grammar, spelling, and sentence structure.		X	X
17	Postings substantially helped the target group to write a high quality assignment report.		X	X
18	Postings utilized not just business periodicals but peer-reviewed scholarly articles with proper citations (using both in-text citations and end of posting citations in the APA format).		X	X
19	Read and considered substantial number of student postings before responding.			X
20	Demonstrated leadership in discussions.			X

Appendix E			
ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FOR A MARKETING PLAN - MKT 640			
Instructor: _____			
Course: MKT 640			
Group Name: _____.			
Evaluate the written report of your marketing plan, section by section, and overall, by using this Evaluation Scale: A (Excellent) = 93-100, A- = 90-92, B+ (Good) = 87-89, B=83-86, B- = 80-82, C+ (Fair) = 77-79, C = 70-76, D (Poor) = 60-69, and F (Not Acceptable) = 0-59.			
Assessment Criteria	Underperforming	Average	Excellent
Standard Marketing Plan* 1. Executive Summary 2. Situation Analysis 3. Goal 4. Strategy 5. Tactics 6. Implementation 7. Control 8. Exhibits 9. References	Some but not all sections of a standard Marketing Plan have been completed.	All sections of a standard Marketing Plan have been completed but some subsections are poorly developed.	All sections and subsections of a standard Marketing Plan have been completed.
Assessment Tools (Control)	Marketing plan has no appropriate measurement tools for its objectives; no periodic plan assessments are scheduled.	Marketing Plan contains appropriate measurement tools for some of the objectives; no periodic plan assessments are scheduled.	Every objective has an appropriate measurement tool and periodic plan assessments are scheduled.
Plan Cohesiveness	Most sections of the plan are disjointed so no consistent picture emerges.	The Marketing Plan is by and large cohesive.	The Marketing Plan is consistent and cohesive throughout all sections and subsection.
Information Resources	Information collection is weak or non-existent. Hypothetical information, if developed, is unsatisfactory.	Information collection is shallow but some effort was made to collect necessary information. Hypothetical information, if developed, is mostly satisfactory.	Thorough use of available information from various sources. Hypothetical information, if developed, is very satisfactory.
The APA Style of Writing	Did not follow the APA Style of writing in much of the following areas: document formatting, citations, body of text, headings/subheadings, references, tables, figures, etc.	Mostly followed the APA Style throughout in terms of document formatting, citations, body of text, headings/subheadings, references, tables, figures, etc.	Consistently followed the APA Style throughout in document formatting, citations, body of text, headings/subheadings, references, tables, figures, etc.
Writing Quality	Disappointing overall appearance; extensive spelling/grammatical errors; the Marketing Plan does not flow; the reader is lost; verbose or meandering and/or not sufficient explanation of concepts or arguments.	Good overall appearance; very few spelling/ grammatical errors; the Plan flows; the reader is usually not lost; mostly logical; mostly concise and to the point.	Overall appearance is good; very few or no spelling/grammatical errors; the reader is never lost; very logical; concise and to the point.
*A standard marketing plan is based on Chernev, <i>The Marketing Plan Handbook</i> . Chicago, IL: Cerebellum, 2011.			

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