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Ashley Salter and Alyssa Albrecht

Introduction

Active learning strategies have proven to be successful in face-to-face instruction resulting in increased student learning outcomes (Stevens, 2015). Considering a newer approach that implements these tried and true strategies in an online environment can prove to be daunting. However, the benefits prove to be well worth the time dedicated to developing an instructional practice that leads to enriched participation and heightened engagement (as cited in McCarthy & Anderson, 2000). Two active learning techniques successfully utilized are debates and role play.

Online or Blended Learning Debates

The use of debates as an active learning strategy allows learners to apply various points of view and create an opinion on a topic. From the inception of the original judgment, the learner must prove the validity behind their position and often convince others to agree with them (Freeley & Steinberg, 2005). Debates are typically thought of as an activity that takes place in a face-to-face setting where students select an active and aggressive approach to their learning by developing a position and arguing their sides. In an online or blended learning environment, debates are held to the same general expectations. More importantly, in both settings, the students are engaging deeper with the instructional content, which improves their comprehension, resulting in higher learning gains, greater critical thinking, and improved grade point averages, particularly for those students with lower standardized test scores (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006).

A recommended means of incorporating online debates in an online or blended learning environment include the use of a common and widely used technique typically implemented in a face to face setting: fish-bowl debates. The fish-bowl debate technique, although successful with face-to-face students, can also be easily implemented in an online setting with the use of an online discussion forum (Kennedy, 2007). The fish-bowl technique requires the instructor to divide the class into three groups that will collaborate to formulate thoughts for their assigned viewpoint. Two groups serve as the opposing "fish" within the fishbowl and the last group serves as the outside audience. The opposing groups are required to present their arguments and respond to each other. The audience must then engage with the "fish" inside of the fishbowl by either supporting ideas with research or clarifying views. The audience must ultimately choose a side to support based on the arguments made inside of the fishbowl.

To implement this strategy in an online platform, the instructor must create two groups (Group 1 and Group 2) within the Learning Management System (LMS) and assign groups. Upon successful completion of forming the groups within the LMS, the "fish" would utilize one discussion forum to post their first and sub sequential arguments; thus, creating an online fish-bowl. The audience, (Group 3), would then be required to respond to the same discussion forum

to articulate their supporting or opposing ideas. By utilizing the fishbowl strategy, each participating student takes an active role in interacting with the content and cultivating their critical thinking skills, improving retention, and determining the proper application of material being studied (Shaw, 2012).

Role Play in Online or Blended Learning

Role play is a type of active learning where students work together through specific situations and guidelines while assuming various assigned personas (Russell & Shepherd, 2010). Results tend to indicate that the use of role play simulations in educational settings produce a deeper learning of the content (Paquette, 2012). With results like this, it seems obvious why role play has long been used as a strategy to encourage students to make strong connections with content in traditional face-to-face classrooms. Yet, role play can be particularly useful in an online environment because it frees learners by creating a degree of separation between peers during the vulnerable activity of assuming a persona (Bender, 2005).

Role play is versatile and can be incorporated across disciplines. For instance, instructors have seen success with character analysis in literature, deepening understanding of historical events, or even introducing students to real-life scenarios faced in the workplace (Bender, 2005; Dodd, 2015). When determining how to incorporate role play into the online or blended learning environment, educators must make several unique decisions on its incorporation into their course.

The following considerations are recommended when preparing to incorporate role play into the online or blended learning environment.

First, instructors can decide whether the role play should be designed as a course-long or assignment-specific assessment. Course-long role plays often involve students assuming a single persona for the duration of the course but taken through various scenarios. These various scenarios can span across several assessments and may cover multiple objectives. Assignment-specific role plays have students engage in a single scenario while adopting their persona, but multiple objectives may be assessed here as well. Second, instructors must decide how the personas will be adopted by the students. Personas can be assigned by instructors, chosen by students, or even created by the students. The context of the assessment should determine the parameters being set and expectations being placed. Finally, instructors must decide on the technology used to facilitate the role play scenario. Synchronous and asynchronous tools are commonly used within various LMS platforms to support role play in a collaborative way, such a video conferencing tools or discussion boards (Bender, 2005). When these considerations are made, and role play is integrated into an active learning experience online, students are driven to interact with the content beyond a traditional form. This results in a more captivating learning experience (McCarthy & Anderson, 2000).

Final Thoughts

Determining the best design for active learning assessments in a course has various considerations such as objectives, student needs, instructor experience, and more. These design

decisions prove to invoke an opportunity for instructors, course developers, and instructional designers to consider new means of improving instructional practices. By merging the classic concept of developing instruction as an active experience with the modern online and blended learning modalities, education can become innovative and exciting once more.

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