

# ONLINE CL@SSROOM

IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

OCTOBER 2008

## Up-Front Housekeeping for Web Courses: Facilitating Consistent Performance with First-of-Semester Strategies

By Lori Norin and Tim Wall

We want our students to learn what we have to teach them. We want them to retain it. In the best case, we want them to enjoy the work, assimilate the driving principles, and look forward to each opportunity to make their work better. We diligently gear up and learn how to use slick software that allows students easy access to a wide variety of materials.

We've committed to teaching online, maybe totally or maybe using Web materials to enhance a traditional classroom setting. Yet with all the features and potential efficiency of teaching software, we still know that too many students simply aren't "getting" what we have to teach, let alone enjoying it. Why? We bought the best software available; we learned every bell and whistle it had to offer, and we're confident of our own credentials.

So what's missing? Maybe it's as simple as a little up-front housekeeping. Before day one, we can take a few simple but effective steps that will help students launch through that first day, then use their energy on the course rather than on frustration.

Don't assume students have a working knowledge of the computer

or of the course software. Offer them a simple video tutorial that acquaints them with your school's software. Recently our university put together such a video. It walks the students through the software, from the simple to the more complex necessity of navigating the course content and tools. For a student, taking five minutes to watch the video is time well spent. Students (and teachers) routinely have trouble logging on the first time.

Our video progresses from logging on to navigating the course, using the various tools, dealing with computer and software problems, contacting the appropriate person for help, and other basics. While these practices seem pretty simple to an experienced Web instructor, they're new to many students, and that includes today's computer-savvy users. The video doesn't stop there. It also stresses the need to view the online course as a serious endeavor that requires daily work and attention to assignments; the video emphasizes that a Web course needs at least as much work on the students' part as a traditional class would.

So now we've laid the groundwork;

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### TIPS FROM THE PROS

#### 7 Things to Personalize Your Online Course

In order to be part of an effective learning community, online learners need to feel the presence of the instructor and fellow learners. Jane Dwyer, a senior lecturer at Rivier College, uses the following techniques to create this sense of social presence in her online psychology courses:

- **Introductory letter**—Before the course starts, Dwyer sends students a letter explaining what they need to do to prepare for the course.
- **Video clip**—To supplement the letter, Dwyer includes a brief welcome video clip. This clip contains no course information; it is solely intended to make students feel connected and welcome.
- **Introductory questions**—At the beginning of the course, Dwyer asks course-related personal questions to introduce students to each other and get them used to interacting in the online forums. For example, she might ask, "At what age did you become an adult, and how did you realize it happened? Is your adult personality the same or different than your adolescent personality?" Despite the

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our students are ready to go—if only. We often find that students haven't paid attention or taken careful notes; they don't always follow all the advice we provide in our orientation. How many of our students really study and learn all the provisions we've so carefully outlined in a syllabus?

This is the point at which the second tier of housekeeping kicks in. Here are some easy-to-implement practices:

- Don't assume students have a working knowledge of the computer. Assume they have a video tutorial designed to acquaint them with the course management system you're using. Now require them to take a short quiz over the tutorial. Allow them to take it as often as they wish, but don't allow them to go forward in the course until they've scored 100 percent.
- Don't assume students understand the workings of an online course. Offer them tips for online learners that include knowledge of traditional versus online learning, Web etiquette, helpful links, and where to go for help. Also include suggested study tips for online learners. Remind students that even though they are at home when they log on to complete their class work, they still need to find an environment free from distractions where they can turn off the cell phone and the iPod, have someone else watch the kids, and really focus on their class work.
- Don't assume students have the minimum equipment and/or skill requirements needed to be successful in an online course. Be sure to make the minimum equipment requirements readily available to students prior to the official start date. In addition to whatever postings your institution might offer, a personal email to all students enrolled is a great idea. If your institution doesn't test students for minimum computer

skills, be sure those enrolled understand the basic computer skills needed. All too many students who sign up for Web courses can't save a file to CD or change a font to boldface.

- Don't assume students know how to behave in a Web course. Require them to sign a behavior and ethics contract. Said contract should outline the acceptable code of conduct for the course. With the immediacy of email, students often fire off messages without thinking about the ramifications of tone or word choice. Students routinely use email and texting for their daily communication with each other and they really may not realize that what works with peers may not be appropriate in an academic setting. Explain such concepts as flaming, using all caps, and interpersonal communication (inappropriate tone) via the Web.
- Don't assume students know the more important rules and regulations in the syllabus. How many times do students receive a detailed syllabus only to come back and ask an obvious question? Again, give them a short syllabus quiz and require that they score 100 percent before they continue in the course. Four or five questions are plenty.

We're by no means claiming that this list is exhaustive, or that it will guarantee success. What we can claim is that these practices will net fewer and less troublesome episodes; maybe you'll avoid that mid-semester insomnia generator that brings you out of a sound sleep with these words: Why didn't I take care of that when I had the chance?

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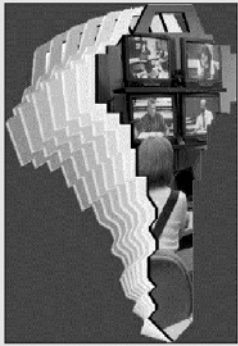
# Developing Interaction Activities for Distance Education

By Rosemary M. Lehman, PhD, and Richard A. Berg, MS

Feelings of isolation, frustration, and lack of engagement and connection are major causes of distance education dissatisfaction (Palloff and Pratt 1999). By integrating interaction activities into distance education experiences, instructors help learners feel engaged and connected. Relevant interaction activities thoughtfully developed can also enrich the course environment and help students construct and internalize their own meaning.

When instructors decide to become involved with distance education, it's important to ground what they do in theory. "Past distance education theories have looked at technology from delivery and industrial viewpoints. Our viewpoint is a human one and learner-centered. It assumes that we are all, instructor and learner alike, active participants in the world around us." (Lehman and Berg 2007). Using an instructional design framework of preplanning, planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating, it recognizes the many distance education variables and works toward resolving those variables by working through seven key perceptual areas—understanding participants, knowing the environment, being a team player, developing formats and strategies, creating interaction activities, integrating support, and monitoring for quality.

**Instructional Design Process**  
4 Areas – 7 Keys

<b>Plan</b>	
1-Participants, 2-Environment, 3-Team	
<b>Develop</b>	
4-Formats/Strategies, 5-Interaction	
<b>Implement</b>	
6-Support	
<b>Followup</b>	
7-Monitor for Quality	

## What's an effective way to think about formats and strategies?

Teaching and learning at a distance are different from teaching and learning in the traditional classroom. We need to acknowledge those differences and work to accommodate them. When creating your formats and

strategies, visualize your distance education experience and consider the differences within the instructional design framework and using the seven key areas. Ask yourself these questions: How will I need to redesign my classroom course to accommodate the differences? How will I need to find out about my students, feel comfortable in the new environment, and communicate with the team I will be working with? How will I need to think about my overall course, the individual units, the modules within each unit, design my materials, create my visuals and rich media, chunk my content, engage my students, provide support, and monitor my students and the course for quality?

## How can I develop meaningful interaction activities?

When you've decided on your overall formats and strategies, consider the various types of interaction: 1) instructor to learner, 2) learner to instructor, 3) learner to learner, 4) learner to content, 5) learner to medium, and 6) learner to context. Then, ask yourself where within the course is interaction appropriate? What types of interaction activities will best meet your students' needs? How will you adapt the interaction for the use of the technology? What materials will you need to effectively carry out the activities? How will you evaluate the activities?

Interaction activities abound; it's impossible to develop a complete list. So, we've provided you with a sample of 25 in an interaction activity grid. We've arranged them in the categories of Presenting, Personalizing, Showing, Participating, and Questioning.

Present	Personalize	Show	Participate	Question
min-lecture	name use	objects	readings	Q & A
expert guest	email	pictures	fax/email	black box
interviews	bio-form	trigger video	groupwork	debates
case study	bio Webpage	partic. video	field trips	quizzes
storytelling	dialogue	simulation	lab sessions	fish bowl

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## Using Surveys to Improve Courses, Programs, and Instruction, Part 5

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

Surveys are easy to design and implement, but designing *good* questions and getting *good* information *isn't* easy. That's why I've written previous articles on how to write good questions so you get the information you need. This month, we'll complete this series by discussing the use of Web survey applications.

Web survey applications are online applications such as Zoomerang and Survey Monkey, which facilitate creation, implementation, and analysis of surveys using their online application. Your institution may have its own Web survey applications, and this article should apply to them as well.

### Advantages and disadvantages of Web surveys

One of the advantages of using a Web survey is that potential respondents likely know how to use them. Here are some additional advantages to using Web surveys:

- Most of the Web survey applications make designing, implementing, and analyzing a Web survey quick and easy.
- Some of the Web survey application vendors allow anyone to create free surveys.
- Many of the Web survey applications can apply complex question logic (such as if the answer is a or b, present the next question and if the answer is c or d, input two additional questions before the next question) and have other unique features that can't be accomplished with paper or most email surveys.
- Some research shows that people give longer answers to open-ended questions on Web surveys than

they do on other kinds of surveys.

And now some disadvantages:

- It's quite easy for respondents to quit in the middle of a Web survey because interacting with a Web page is impersonal.
- You may need to make sure that only desired respondents can reply and that desired respondents can only reply once.

### Design considerations

Include introduction text and general instructions on the first screen. Explain why you are asking students to provide answers to these questions and what you will do with the information. Assure them that their answers are confidential (if they are—and they should be). Put other instructions where they are needed rather than putting all instructions up front.

Design for clarity. Web survey applications may allow you to add various bells and whistles, but use these judiciously because they are distracting. It may be a good idea to use a different font or font attribute for instructions rather than for question text so respondents can find instructions easily. But don't use italic for long passages of text. Italic text is hard to read.

Make the background color white or very light and the question text black so respondents can easily read the questions. Don't use graphics unless they are needed to answer the question.

All multiple-choice answers should be labeled the same way. Be consistent with color, too. If the instructions are blue, they should always be blue. Remember that some respondents may be colorblind or using a screen reader.

Make the survey as short as possible, and tell students how long it should take. Five to 10 minutes is reasonable. Provide open-ended questions to find out what changes are needed.

Limit required answers to truly crucial questions. Making questions required may increase dropouts or nonsensical answers. And if required questions are multiple-choice, be careful to include all expected answers or add an answer that combines multiple choice with open-ended, such as d) None of the above (please explain).

Test your survey. Make sure that all the pages look and act as expected. Ask others to tell you if your questions are clear.

Most Web survey applications allow you to download the data into Excel for analysis or to analyze the survey online. If you want to be able to determine if the answers are different for males and females, undergrads and grads, new online students and experienced online students, for example, make sure to ask for those demographics in the beginning of the survey.

### Web survey applications

[www.questionpro.com/](http://www.questionpro.com/)  
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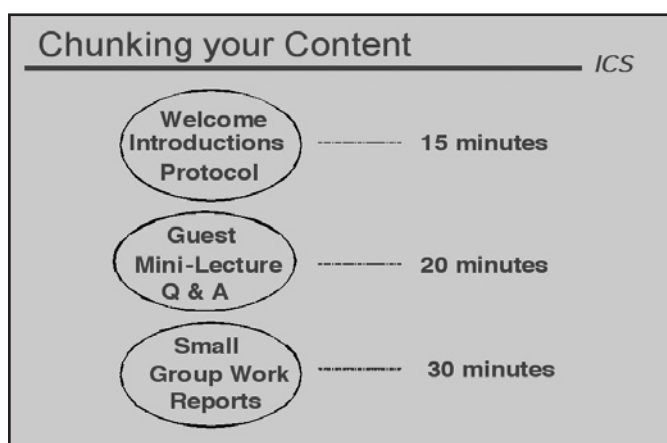
*Patti Shank, PhD, CPT, is a widely recognized information and instructional designer and writer and author who helps others build valuable information and instruction. She can be reached through her website: [www.learningpeaks.com](http://www.learningpeaks.com). @*

## How have other instructors developed formats and strategies and interaction activities? Two examples...

- Gordon, a science instructor, was asked to teach his traditional classroom course in an online format. His institution has a learning management system (LMS) that will serve as his course container. His challenge is to rework his formats and strategies and create opportunities for student interaction with him, the content, each other, the material, and the context of their experiences.

He's asked students to send him personal information to post to the LMS; he's uploaded his syllabus and all of the necessary instructions; he's sent out a lab kit with multiple activities, for work and reporting. Reporting will be via synchronous Web conferencing. In addition, he's requiring the use of the LMS formal discussion board and the informal chat café. He's also set up electronic office hours for questions, for feedback, and for helping students feel connected.

- Lisa has decided to use videoconferencing and an LMS to teach her creative writing course. She's carefully developed her objectives for her overall course and for each session. She's chunked her material so that no one activity lasts more than 15 minutes.



Prior to the start of the course, she's had each of the students post a bio-form to the LMS. She has the bio-forms available during online discussion and in front of her, embedded in a seating chart, during the synchronous sessions.

She's invited guest writers to provide 10-minute

mini-lectures, via audio, followed by five minutes of Q & A. Then, using the five remote sites as small groups, she'll ask them to mute their microphones and discuss the guests' comments for about five minutes. Then, she'll have each site give a five-minute report back.

A centerpiece activity for a number of her sessions will be having students look closely at various types of visuals. After concentrating on the visuals, students will create a story or poem to share with all the sites. At the end of the course, electronic portfolios of the creations will provide a percentage of the each student's course grade.

## Food for thought...

There you have it—a taste of distance education with some background information on the need for interaction, a little theory, an instructional design framework, the importance of formats and strategies, interaction activities, and two effective examples. We hope this article has stimulated you to think about distance education. If you're already involved, we hope it's helped you become excited about the possibility of new technologies and new ways to engage students. We also hope it's piqued your interest for our November 13 online seminar.

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Palloff, R. and Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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*Join Rosemary and Rich for their online seminar "Developing Interaction Activities for Distance Education" November 13. For information, visit [www.magnapubs.com/calendar/257.html](http://www.magnapubs.com/calendar/257.html). @*

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual On the Road: Getting the Most Out of Your Laptop or PC for Very Productive Teaching, Part 2

By Errol Craig Sull

Last month I presented Part I of this column's subject—using today's computer technology to improve the efficiency and productivity of your online teaching, whether you use a PC or a laptop. The amount of information, software, hardware, and peripherals is really quite staggering. Still, I enjoy taking what is out there and either adapting it to my teaching needs or using it as is—all to make my computer efforts, both online and PC, better. And I'm hoping that some of you reading this will send along to me a selection of the best computer tips and tricks you've come across that have helped your online teaching; I'd certainly like to share them with all who read this column.

Meanwhile, here is Part 2:

### **Two neat little tricks to help your mouse feet slide smoothly.**

Mouse pads get dirty, as do the "feet" on a mouse; before you decide to buy new ones there are two things to try that will literally smooth out the pad and mouse feet. First, take some eyeglass cleaner and spray a bit on your mouse pad; wipe with a cloth that is used to clean computer monitors (NOT tissues or napkins—they can leave bits behind). As for your mouse feet, simply use your fingernail or the tip of a knife to scrape off the gunk on each foot. Do both regularly and you'll be surprised at how much smoother the mouse will slide.

### **Two great software freebies.**

Adobe Reader ([www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com)) lets you do just about anything PDF-related, including online collaboration; there are also features to aid users with disabilities. Many schools post documents in PDF format, and more and more students are using

PDF formats, so this is a must to have. Also, download the latest version of Mozilla's Firefox ([www.mozilla.com/en-US/](http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/))—a large number of schools are recommending their programs be used with this browser rather than with Internet Explorer as their tech people claim fewer glitches occur. Both Adobe Reader and Firefox are free.

**A great help to check on weather in any city.** If you are traveling to another U.S. city for a conference, to give a lecture, or just on vacation, it's important to know all aspects of the weather—and I do mean all. Weather Bonk ([www.weatherbonk.com](http://www.weatherbonk.com)) not only gives you the usual temperatures, humidity, and wind speed, but also radar and cloud detail, as well as real-time webcam shots of various areas in the locale so you can see the weather. It's a nice free aid for the traveling online teacher.

**The best free firewall.** We all know how important computer security is, and the more students we teach, the greater chance of receiving infected files, viruses, and other problems. Comodo Personal Firewall Pro 3.0 can conform to the needs of any user and handles all basic firewall functions. It protects your system against hack attack, controls which programs get Internet access, and resists malware-type assaults that attempt to shut it down. And to reduce the number of confirmation pop-ups, it automatically allows nearly a million known-to-be-safe programs.

Download it at [www.personalfirewall.comodo.com/](http://www.personalfirewall.comodo.com/)

Zoho Notebook can help organize your classes. Whether you teach one or multiple courses, taking notes is an integral part of teaching—reminders, follow-ups, new ideas, folks to contact, and other things

you need to remind yourself of. A neat note-taking program to help you do all this and more is AdventNet's Zoho (free) Notebook service (<http://notebook.zoho.com>). It allows you to organize multiple page-on-screen binders, including text, graphics, audio, video, and embedded Web content. You can also share part or all of the notebook with others. This is a real aid in helping with organization and staying on top of all online teaching tasks.

### **Be sure to have an international cell phone when traveling outside the United States.**

While we may travel overseas our classes usually trudge right on, thus the need for constant contact with students is imperative. Many schools encourage calls between faculty and students—and sometimes this is a must—yet seldom do cell phone providers in the United States automatically include international dialing. Be sure to check out your cell service provider for this service, but also know about Telestial ([www.telestial.com](http://www.telestial.com)) where you can buy or rent international phones on a monthly or more basis. Another tip: You can usually rent or buy a prepaid phone from a carrier at your destination.

### **Try Powerset for some additional search information.**

While Powerset ([www.powerset.com](http://www.powerset.com), which is free) will not be giving Google a run for its money (or market share) anytime soon, this search engine not only looks at words but at their meanings, too. Its searches are restricted to Wikipedia, Freebase, and a few other specialized databases, but any search engine that can help add to the info I share

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## Team Teaching with an Embedded Librarian

By Rob Kelly

For the past four years, Alisa Klinger and Tina Lau have teamed up to teach English 1a, an online transfer-level, first-year composition course at Cuesta College. Lau is a librarian who supports other instructors in their courses, but this partnership is more elaborate than the others, providing direct benefits to Klinger and their students. It's an interesting approach that has not yet formalized by the administration.

The partnership is a virtual one. Most of their interaction occurs online and occasionally on the phone. They work from different campuses and have met in person just once by chance. Lau received no direct compensation for participating in this manner. Technically, Lau is not a team teacher, "but she's a very active presence in my class, and I

pursue our relationship as team teaching, just as I would if I was teaching with another English instructor in a learning community," Klinger says.

Having an embedded librarian in an online course offers many advantages for all involved and even those not directly involved in the course.

### A second set of eyes

Working closely with a librarian has given Klinger the benefit of feedback from a colleague who has intimate knowledge of her course. "By team teaching, I have a comrade in arms. I have somebody who goes through my course with a different set of eyes. Some instructors aren't comfortable with another pair of eyes looking at everything they do. I'm not uncomfortable with it. It's extremely beneficial because Tina can find things that I don't see, and she can

approach things in a way that a student might not have anticipated," Klinger says.

### "We train each other."

Cuesta College does not yet have extensive experience in offering online course, and working with a co-instructor has made the process of implementing effective instructional practices and transitioning to a new course management system easier than it might have been otherwise.

"We train each other. We've gone through two course delivery systems, and both of them have had a great deal of challenges. Currently, the one we're using has a great number of problems with it. I find I get technological support from Tina, which also trickles down to the students and

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with students is definitely a plus.

**A one-stop shop for Internet access throughout the United States.** Upon occasion I come across some software that is not free but is so valuable in what it offers that I deem it important enough to pass on to you—such is Boingo ([www.boingo.com](http://www.boingo.com)). While it costs \$21.95 per month for laptops and \$7.95 monthly for mobile phones, Boingo offers almost 6,000 Wi-Fi hot spots across the United States, including every Barnes & Noble and every Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf café. If you are an online instructor who travels quite a bit—and there are many—you might find this service quite helpful.

A really versatile Web page builder. More and more online instructors are setting up their own websites and to do this, of course,

means building the Web pages. An incredibly versatile Web start-page builder, Pageflakes ([www.pageflakes.com/](http://www.pageflakes.com/)) is a very helpful free download that lets you add just about any Web content you can think of—videos, picture, news feeds, email, maps, and more. If you are new to Web page building, this site is an easy yet comprehensive way to start.

Two free alternatives to Microsoft Word. The world, at times, seems to be only Microsoft Word. But while we may have it—and our school may require it—many students simply don't have the bucks to buy it. For those who need an alternative to Word—including online instructors—check out ThinkFree Office ([www.thinkfree.com](http://www.thinkfree.com)) and OpenOffice.org ([www.openoffice.org](http://www.openoffice.org)). Both offer Word, Excel, and PowerPoint clones.

**REMEMBER:** The Internet's offerings are like postage stamps: interesting to look at but not really powerful until applied to an end user.

*Please let me hear from you, including sending along suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at [errol-craigsull@aol.com](mailto:errol-craigsull@aol.com). And remember: please forward me your computer tips and suggestions to make teaching in the online classroom more efficient and productive.*

*Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 12 years and has a national reputation in the subject, both writing and conducting workshops on it. He is currently putting the finishing touches on his next book, *The Student's Complete Guide to Online Learning*. @*

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makes the whole design better,” Klinger says.

### Course design

Klinger and Lau’s course gets the maximum benefit from their complementary skills and knowledge. The course has several discussion folders—one for every test, assignment, a café forum, a feedback folder, and—unlike most courses—a discussion folder specifically for discussions with the librarian.

Students are well aware of the distinct roles of each instructor from the beginning of the course. Each has her biography, a photograph, and assignments. “They see us as two people and two distinct personalities with two distinct sets of concerns,” Klinger says.

An ongoing presence by a librarian offers a clear advantage over the typical one-time visits by librarians that are common in face-to-face courses. In the online setting with an embedded librarian students receive support when they need it. They ask questions and receive information when it’s relevant to what

they are doing in the course. They are also more likely to seek help when the librarian is integrated into the course, Klinger says.

The course is primarily asynchronous, but it does have one mandatory synchronous chat. The chat is difficult to schedule and students usually complain, but in the end they typically rate it as one of the best features of the course, Klinger says.

One of the goals of the chat is to get students to help each other. For example, students are asked to come up with five tips on how to proceed with the research paper project. “Sometimes the tips aren’t all that insightful. I think, how rudimentary. And the students will say, ‘That was a great [piece of advice] I never thought of.’ It pitches the assignment right at the level of the students,” Klinger says, adding that sometimes it’s difficult as an instructor what it was like to be a student at that level.

The chats are not the only synchronous aspect of the course. When Klinger or Lau see that a student is logged in, they will send an instant message of encouragement or offer of support.

Lau is always “visible” when she is online so students know when she’s logged in, and they will sometimes invite her to chat. Klinger has specific times when she is available for synchronous interaction. This synchronous component provides timely support for students but it’s not perfect. For one, some students have difficulty figuring out how to use instant messenger, and the exchanges that occur in instant messenger cannot be cut and pasted into a document, which limits its usefulness.

“Team teaching with Ally has really made me feel more a part of an English course than I ever have because I see the assignments as they come by and read announcements. I really get a much better feel for the flow of the course and where the bumps are in the road for the students. I’m in the course. With in-person courses I never got that sense because I would be in the classroom one day to teach a little module on how to use our library research workbook, but I wasn’t listening in on what was going on all throughout the semester,” Lau says. @

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personal nature of these questions, students typically answer them thoughtfully.

- **Pet gallery**—Including a photo and profile of each student can add to social presence, but some students are uncomfortable sharing this information. So Dwyer asks students to post pet photos and information about them instead. (For those who don’t have pets, they can post photos of friends’ or relatives’ pets.) It is an effective icebreaker—“like mothers bragging about their newborns,” Dwyer says.
- **Bully session**—In the fourth week of an eight-week course, Dwyer asks students to write three things they like about the course and one thing that could be improved. Dwyer makes it a point to implement any helpful suggestions in the current course if possible so current students benefit.
- **Shared leadership**—Each student has the opportunity to facilitate discussions. For each unit Dwyer has a student come up with five or six questions, facilitate the discussion, and summarize it at the end of the week.
- **Question forum**—Whenever a student emails Dwyer a question that she thinks is relevant to the entire class, she posts it anonymously and answers it in a forum dedicated to non-content-related questions and lets the student know that the answer is in the question forum. Students pick up on this quickly and begin to post questions directly to the question forum. And sometimes students answer each other’s questions in this forum.

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