

## Online Collaboration Strategies That Work

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Online collaboration can be tricky for everyone. At Wake Technical Community College, we sometimes struggle to communicate in a timely manner among teams spread over multiple campuses. It is especially challenging to build community in an asynchronous environment such as an online class where students work on class lessons, modules, and activities at different times throughout the week. I have found a few techniques to help foster collaboration in my online classes that have gotten positive feedback from my students.

### Extra Credit for Answering Questions

When I first started teaching online, I was getting the same questions via email from multiple students. I realized three things:

- (1) Often, multiple students had the exact same question.
- (2) Emailing only those students asking questions was not going to help other students, who may have the same questions but are reticent to ask.
- (3) There had to be a more efficient way to answer the same question multiple times.

After trial and error, I found that using discussion boards was an excellent way to provide timely answers to student with questions while also building a sense of community within the class.

I began by putting a forum on our class discussion board for each unit. I told my students that I would check and respond to all posts at least once a day, but if they beat me to correctly answering a question, they would receive extra credit towards their homework grade.

I directed students to post their questions on the discussion board almost every time I posted an announcement during the first month of class. If a student emailed me a question that should have gone on the discussion board, I gently reminded him or her that it was a great question to put online so other students could benefit from my response as well.

My students love this approach. In my online classes, there are typically three questions posted each day. The majority of the time, students answer each other's questions before I get a chance to respond.

Because I teach mathematics, there are multiple correct approaches to problems for some topics. I tell my students that if they post a different correct solution,

they will also get extra credit. I love to watch students post multiple approaches, and often it naturally creates a discussion about the benefits and drawbacks of each one. The students do not realize how much they are learning when they explain a problem and discuss it with their peers.

Online question forums benefit the questioner because he or she is getting a quick response to their question. They benefit the responder because he or she is getting a chance to teach math (in addition to a little extra credit)! The act of thinking through and explaining a process is the best way to learn. The online question forum benefits other students in the class because they may have the same question (whether or not they realize it), and they get to learn from the questions posted and the responses.

This process also benefits me because I no longer feel I have to check the discussion board late in to the evening every day. By giving students a forum to get help when they need it that is not entirely dependent on me, they build an online community to help each other when I am unavailable. I always check the posts, compliment a correct answer, and make a correction if needed. I estimate that 90 percent of the time, students post correct solutions. It is rare that I need to make major corrections.

I now use this method in my seated classes as well. I can spend more time in class teaching and doing interesting activities instead of answering homework questions. My students know they can receive help online anytime and that they will never go more than 24 hours before they will get help in class from me.

### Group Discussion Boards

Another technique I have found useful in online classes is to put students in small groups with their own discussion boards. Their attendance points come from responding to group discussion board posts.

Sometimes I ask the groups to fully explain one problem from a set of practice problems. They can choose their problem, but cannot repeat a problem that someone else has already explained. I offer students problems of varying degrees of difficulty so they can practice skills at all levels. Students often refer back to these problems later to understand the process or prepare for a test.

Another group discussion board prompt I use is having students use their own words to describe a solution. For example, "In your own words, how do you distinguish between scenarios involving a linear function versus an exponential function?" For this type of prompt, I set the discussion board to hide other responses until the student posts his or her answer. I love the "explain in

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your own words” prompts because it gives me insight into what students are thinking, and they often explain the process using different approaches. By reading each other’s words, they are filling gaps in their own understanding.

### Group Assignments

I struggled for some time orchestrating group assignments in an online class. Initially, I would give students an assignment and let them attack it how they wanted to within their group. This approach did not work. Inevitably, one student would try the assignment and everyone else would respond “looks good to me” without much thought or effort. The one student who did the bulk of the work complained that he or she did it all without help from the group members. I would be overrun with emails from students complaining, and had a hard time justifying why non-contributing group members should get credit on the group project.

I now ask each student to work the assignment in its entirety and post their best attempt to the group discussion board (with other students’ responses hidden until after the post to minimize cheating). After the deadline, each student must look at the other group members’ attempts and post why he or she agrees and disagrees with on each one and why. Then, the students collaborate to create one document to turn in.

If someone does not complete the initial attempt, that student is removed from the group and has to do the assignment on his or her own with a 25 percent penalty. The students who tried the assignment are able to see what everyone else did, and are usually in agreement as to who did it correctly. It does not take them long to compile one document to turn in. The students no longer complain that one person did all of the work since they are all equally responsible for attempting the assignment.

Online enrollment is growing with the evolution of technology. Students get the most out of an online class when the instructor provides the same sense of community and collaboration as in a seated class. Emulating a seated class online is a challenge, but these three approaches have worked well for my classes.

Meghan McIntyre, *Professor, Mathematics*

For more information, contact the author at Wake Technical Community College, [mmcintyre@waketech.edu](mailto:mmcintyre@waketech.edu)