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Fighting Together Instead of Fighting Apart: The ‘How’ and ‘Why’ of Online Study Groups

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I titled this post after Trevor Noah’s introduction to the Black Panther film at the 2019 Oscars when he cited the Xhosa proverb, “Abelungu abazi uba ndiyaxoka.” Trevor translated it to mean: “In times like these, we are stronger when we fight together than when we try to fight apart.” It turns out the proverb was an inside joke among South Africans who knew that he really said was, “White people don’t know I’m lying.” Ha! He got me, even though I’m of Korean descent. Nevertheless I still like the mock translation and the concept behind it.

It is better to fight together. Some courses are a real challenge, and study groups are a strategic way for students to succeed. Here are some ways I think they make a difference in online education and some suggested practices.

1. Set up open virtual study hall hours online

Many learning management systems (LMS) like Canvas integrate Zoom, Big Blue Button, or other video conferencing tools that allow instructors to create virtual rooms which are open 24/7. At any given hour during the day, a student can log into a room online and meet fellow classmates in a virtual study hall to collaborate on homework, prepare for quizzes, exchange

notes, and discuss any aspect of the course. Even if one's LMS does not include video conferencing as part of its platform, instructors can have students form their own Facebook or Google groups.

The first step is to provide the virtual space for study groups to meet. Second is to help students organize. The easiest way is to coordinate groups based in the same time zones. It takes a bit of work, but using scheduling tools like Doodle can help manage competing calendars so everyone eventually finds common times to work together.

2. Assign group presentations where students collaborate and teach one another

There is no faster way to have students learn from one another than to assign a presentation by small groups. In my New Testament courses, I often schedule student presentations on diverse topics on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. I put a sign-up sheet online using the discussion forums and lay out guidelines for the presentation in the syllabus. A week or two before a group presents, I meet with them through video conferencing, coach them on the topic, suggest readings, and ask them to meet on their own using the virtual study hall rooms.

The presentations usually last about 8-10 minutes. Students use PowerPoint or Google Slides to video record their presentations using the tools provided by their LMS or with third-party programs like Screencast-O-Matic, and upload their video presentation onto the discussion forum for the class to watch. The rest of the class comments on the presentation by posting replies. Alternatively, if the course is synchronous, the group live-streams their presentation when we meet online.

3. Scaffold research projects and have students review one another's work

Especially with final research papers, I often "scaffold" the assignment by breaking up the paper into different parts and spread the due dates across the semester. I ask students to choose a paper topic, submit an initial bibliography, read the secondary literature and outline key points of debate, and step-by-step work on major sections of their paper until these sections are ready to be compiled together into a cohesive whole. Along the way, in small groups, students are asked to review one another's work and receive suggestions for improvement.

Peer suggestions cannot replace the feedback given by the instructor of the course, but I often find they offer a friendlier and easier way to receive critique.

4. Leave room for the random lone ranger and alternative assignments

On occasion, a student might have such an unusual schedule that meeting together to do student-to-student collaborations is simply not possible. Such situations do not happen often,

but when they do, I try to provide a fair alternative. I might, for example, ask a student to submit a short paper instead of working with other classmates on a video presentation. Whatever the substitute assignment, it's important to be flexible.

Successful student-to-student interaction requires that I take on a role other than "teacher." The students teach themselves and one another. I plan, coordinate, and set up ideal virtual spaces for students to meet. Along the way, I learn from my students as well.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2019/03/the-how-and-why-of-online-study-groups/>