Book Review

Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction

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Publisher's Description: This is a revision of the first title in Jossey-Bass' Online Teaching & Learning series. This series helps higher education professionals improve the practice of online teaching and learning by providing concise, practical resources focused on particular areas or issues they might confront in this new learning environment. This revision includes updated activities and resources for instructors teaching online. Based on changes in technology and best practices learned from the field the revision provides new information for even seasoned online instructors. Jossey-Bass http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-1118018192.html

The new edition begins with a chapter explaining engaged learning and providing an explanation of the four phases that move students from the role of "Newcomer" through "Cooperator" and "Collaborator" to "Initiator/Partner." Likewise, instructors move from "Social Negotiator" through "Structural Engineer" and "Facilitator" to "Community Member/Challenger." Essentially, you "teach" students how to be engaged learners and to gradually build community and take more responsibility for their own and their peers' learning environment. This framework is prescriptive enough that the authors recommend at least one activity for each phase regardless of how well students are already oriented toward the course, learning online, or each other.

 In *Part One: Constructing Activities to Engage Online Learners,* Chapter 2 talks about designing online environments and Chapter 3 offers a brief explanation of what to consider in assessing engaged learning and then some examples of team assessments, self-assessments, and discussion rubrics that, unfortunately, contain few new ideas. Chapter 4 offers activities to help students learn to use online tools, i.e., a skills survey, a scavenger hunt, and a syllabus quiz; all useful ideas for teaching students new to the online learning environment.

The rest of the book is *Part Two: Activities to Engage Online Learners* and each chapter provides a page or two of introduction to a type of activity and then a group of example activities ranging from icebreakers to learner-led activities. As might be expected, some of the activities are widely usable while others are more discipline-specific and might be difficult to transfer to other content areas.

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Chapter 5 offers some good ideas for effective icebreakers such as "lineup," where students score themselves on five statements about hobbies (reading, sports etc.) and the content of the course and then look for someone with the score that most closely matches their own (I'm assuming on all five statements rather than each statement or a total although that is not clear from the directions). This seems a unique way to help students make connections.

Chapter 6 offers an overly simplistic view of dyad and team possibilities. There are really no truly collaborative activities, i.e., tasks where students must reach agreement on a single answer or plan except the "Medieval Shield" and it is still a compilation of images. More activities that require interaction, critical analysis, and/or reaching consensus would be more engaging than the critique or respond to each others' work type of activities provided. The new edition does contain useful information on factors to consider in assigning groups.

Chapters 7 and 8 have some interesting and creative reflective and "authentic" activities. For instance, creating a bumper sticker to sum up your learning in a class could be fun. Likewise, interviewing a professional about his/her job, responsibilities, and transition from the beginning of his/her career to this position should be helpful for students. I particularly like the "Social Responsibility" group activity to create potential solutions for an actual community problem.

Chapter 9 does a good job of defining games as includes tasks that provide an element of engagement, decision making and knowledge acquisition from a new perspective" and simulations that "explore and replicate real-life situations" (Chapter 9, para. 2). However, there are only three simulations offered and two are discipline-specific but offer templates that could be adapted to other content areas.

Finally, Chapter 10: Learner led Activities does a good job of listing the steps for creating and implementing learner led activities and provides some good examples of activities that students have created. It might have been more useful to have the assignment directions that the examples came from rather than the work the students created.

All in all, the book provides very brief information about each type of activity. If you are looking for in-depth guidelines about creating simulations or games or using dyads and groups in the online environment, look elsewhere. If you are looking for some simple examples, this is a solid resource. Some of the examples are fairly common but others are creative and could certainly provide a foundation for some interesting assignments.

The primary difference between the 2004 and the 2011 editions is, disappointingly, a few updated references, a few paragraphs nodding toward new technologies (i.e., Skype) and blended courses, and some added *Author's Notes* about the activities which offer alternative ways to use them. There is no substantial difference in content, no new types of activities or chapters, and only one new activity, a survey about readiness for learning online. If you are using many of the activities from the 2004 edition and want to consider alternatives, the *Author's Notes* could be useful. Otherwise, the 2004 edition is roughly equivalent to the 2011 edition unless you want to read it on your iPad - only the 2011 edition is available as an eBook.