

Figure 4. Twenty Guidelines for Selecting Online Instructional Methods that use Social Interaction

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1. **Select instructional methods based on fundamental values and goals.** In order to select the most effective and appropriate instructional methods for a particular learning environment, it is important to consider your underlying goals and values before choosing instructional methods, and not just rely on the set of methods that “have always worked well” in past settings. For example, some methods of online discussion are exceptionally effective for creating online learning community, but may not be effective for encouraging deep reflective thinking.
2. **When identifying values about learning, don’t stop at the “learning theory” level.** Values stated in terms of a learning theory, such as Problem-based Learning, are less useful in creating learning goals (and subsequently identifying alternative instructional methods) than are values stated at a “lower” level. For the case of the “value” of PBL, a more useful list of values might be small group problem-solving, using authentic problems, and providing a rich set of learning resources.
3. **Learning goals developed from fundamental values often involve multiple goal categories.** For example, a fundamental value of “forming online community” commonly leads to learning goals concerned with discussion, collaboration, and creating a sense of community. Each of these goals may lead to very different (though often connected) instructional methods.
4. **Collaboration-type learning goals are the most common.** Teaching students how to collaborate, facilitating this collaboration, and supporting student’s collaborative efforts is therefore a primary focus in many online learning settings that use social interaction.
5. **Take the time to consider the instructional conditions associated with selected instructional methods.** No method is likely to work in every situation, even when there are substantial similarities between settings, because there are often important differences in the instructional conditions that influence the effectiveness of the method. Without thoughtful consideration of whether or not the required instructional conditions are met for a particular method, an educator may create an instructional environment that is not effective.
6. **Be prepared to modify instructional methods to accommodate emergent instructional conditions.** Often, instructional conditions change as instruction takes place, for many reasons. Adept instructors will need to adapt to these changing conditions by selecting alternative instructional methods or modifying the methods they are using in order to maintain instructional effectiveness. Over time, it may be possible and useful to develop a set of variations for a particular favorite method in order to implement quick revisions as needed to meet new situationalities.
7. **Keep a record of changes to instructional methods you’ve used in response to changing situationalities.** Writing these changes down will help you remember what worked and what didn’t work, and may make your instruction more effective in future situations. As well, re-reading and reflecting upon these revisions may help you understand your own instructional tendencies (and instructor-related conditions) better, facilitating your own professional growth.
8. **The use of domain experts outside of the “official” class is an effective method to build a sense of learning community.** There are significant conditions that must be met when using this method, of course. Primarily, the experts must be motivated, accessible, and appropriately matched to the student’s collaboration needs (domain knowledge and cognitive level).

Twenty Guidelines ... (continued)

9. **Prepare students to use the communications technologies before requiring significant collaborative work.** It is generally not effective to let students “sink or swim” with new communications technologies by assigning a significant collaborative activity. It is much more effective to allow them to learn and practice with the technologies on smaller activities in a reduced stress, relaxed, and supportive setting where the focus is on learning how to use the technology.
10. **Encouraging students to provide technical support to one another can be an effective method of building online learning community.** When students learn to rely on one another for technical support, and they receive timely, useful help from their peers, they tend to form strong interpersonal relationships with each other. Strong interpersonal relationships are often viewed as an indicator of effective online community.
11. **The educational purpose for using instructional methods that use social interaction should be readily apparent to students.** Participating in social interaction often requires significant student effort, time, and motivation. When students recognize and acknowledge the need and value of interaction, they tend to participate more (depth and frequency), increasing the educational value of the activity for all participants.
12. **Do not overwhelm students with many new technologies at once.** Even though an educator may desire to use all the latest interaction tools in order to create the “best” interactive student learning experience, unless the students value technology tools and are willing to expend significant effort in learning how to use them, using more than one or two new tools at a time will overload many students. Often times, these students simply reject the new technology and return to simpler interaction methods (such as phone or e-mail) and may even stop interacting completely.
13. **For asynchronous discussions, plan for structuring student participation patterns.** In order for an asynchronous group discussion to be effective for encouraging dialog (posts and iterative replies), it is important that students (and sometimes instructors, if acting as a facilitator) participate multiple times, and at regular intervals. Just having enough time to post and reply to peers is not enough; the time must be distributed throughout the discussion timeframe in order to conduct a coordinated discussion.
14. **Allow for socially-focused discussions, but don’t expect them to thrive in all situations.** Many environments include a discussion space for off-topic, socially-focused discussions designed to build community by providing a forum for students to share common interests, engage in extra-curricular discussions, and develop interpersonal relationships. Typically, these discussions are for student use only, so no extra instructor work is required. In some cases, these discussions are very active and productive, but in many cases they are not. In any case, the existence of this opportunity (even the perception of opportunity) may be enough to help build community.
15. **Synchronous methods should vary depending on the size of the participant group.** Large-group synchronous settings are more conducive to “broadcast-type” activities, such as presentations and lectures. Small groups are able to carry on effective synchronous discussions, especially when a goal is to reach group consensus or make other types of group decisions.
16. **External, non-instructional conditions can influence the effectiveness of instructional methods.** External conditions may affect a participant or other part of the online education system in a manner that subsequently affects the instructional or learning process in some way. For example, a significant weather event could influence participation in a planned synchronous interaction activity if participants cannot access the interaction space due to extensive power outages. Or, an economic downturn in a region could impact learners’ jobs, requiring them to work longer hours (reducing the time they have for interaction), or possibly removing their access to the learning environment altogether.
17. **Plan to support student self-regulated learning (self pacing, etc.).** Many online learners participate from the [academic] isolation of their homes and workplaces. Learners who are new to the online learning environment may need extra support and guidance as they develop new “learning skills” in this self-paced, individualized setting.

Twenty Guidelines ... (continued)

18. **Student motivation is the most common and overall the most important instructional condition.** With adequate motivation, students can overcome many challenges, even other, unmet instructional conditions such as not enough time, or student values that do not align with the educator's values (such as building learning community). Without adequate motivation, very little social interaction of any value takes place. Effective instruction must always consider motivational factors – and it makes good sense to begin with conditions of motivation.
19. **Instructor motivation is an important condition, too.** Even though most studies do not mention the instructional condition of instructor motivation, many instructional methods, such as moderating a student discussion and facilitating student group collaboration, require significant levels of instructor preparation and participation. As with any person, high levels of instructor motivation often lead to excellent instructor performance and effective social interaction.
20. **There are instructional methods that use social interaction that can be effectively used to meet *any* instructional situation.** Large classes or small, co-located or remote students, synchronous or asynchronous interactions, small collaborative groups or independent study; all of these situations may benefit from instructional methods that use social interaction. As an instructor, it is helpful to be creative, flexible, and open to new opportunities to create a socially interactive online learning environment.

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