

## Seminar Position Statement

---

As online learning education continues to become more prominent in higher education, so does the need to examine effective ways to engage students with their peers, their educators, and the course material. Incorporating synchronous activities within online classrooms has been empirically linked to a wide variety of benefits (Watts, 2016). These benefits often include increased student motivation and engagement, improved student connections and communication, and higher overall grades. Investigations have also concluded that the integration of synchronous events can enhance interaction between classmates and faculty which, in turn, can create more satisfying learning experiences (Altun, Kalaycı, & Avci, 2011; Snowball & Mostert, 2010). It has been widely suggested that students should be partners in the online learning process and afforded a variety of opportunities to actively link theory and practical application during live seminar events.

Hrastinski and Jaldemark (2012) investigated how students of higher education participate in online seminars and why they participate in certain ways. They examined three aspects of synchronous participation found by Haythornthwaite (2002) to be of importance in building and sustaining online learning communities. The three aspects included social support, task management and information exchange, and can be defined as:

- **Social support** includes sharing personal experiences and anecdotes, providing emotional support and community-building, all of which are important in building trust and an atmosphere that encourages open communication.
- **Task management** includes responsibility for planning and managing coursework. This can be accomplished through discussions about upcoming assignments, showing relevant examples, modeling expectations, sharing templates, and discussing elements in grading rubrics and performance assessment.
- **Information exchange** includes the asking and answering content-related questions, facilitating discussions, disseminating relevant content, and providing activities to support the course outcomes by using tools that will enhance learning.

All of the online programs offered by Purdue Global include synchronous seminars facilitated by faculty members. These real time events provide valuable opportunities for learners to engage in an extended learning community with their instructor and classmates. The three characteristics of highly effective seminars as referenced by Hrastinski and Jaldemark (2012) should be regarded as key instructional expectations to be widely demonstrated as faculty plan for and deliver seminars.

## **Best Practices for Promoting Student Engagement in Seminar**

---

The following is a list of best practices offered to guide the faculty toward the effective delivery of seminar events, reflective of the three elements of effective synchronous engagement defined by Hrastinski and Jaldemark (2012). It should be noted that the list offers wide-ranging guidance for the delivery of synchronous events consistent with the higher learning setting. Faculty are encouraged to consider the following practices as they strive to enhance the efficacy of synchronous events under their purview.

**Planning** – a sample of preparatory tasks to be completed prior to the seminar.

- Assemble an agenda of topics to be addressed in the seminar. In some cases, the topics might have been predetermined by the subject matter expert who helped design the course. Faculty should prepare seminar agendas to include items that are consistent with the unique interests of current course, including new or expanded topics that complement the learning needs of currently enrolled students.
- Post an announcement about the seminar, including agenda items. Many faculty find value in also sending email messages to their students, promoting attendance and offering details on the seminar agenda ahead of the event.
- Prepare sufficient learning content and activities for the event to last the full hour. It is better to have too much planned, rather than not enough.
- Create a deck of PowerPoint slides that will guide the progress of the live event. In some cases, slides might have already been prepared for the event. In each case, faculty should ensure that the slides are personalized to capture unique aspects of the group of audience of learners.
- As you plan the event, take advantage of the opportunities in leveraging the array of tools available to enrich your delivery. See the section below on possible activities to further complement the synchronous delivery of online instruction.
- Assemble a list of any information that will be pasted into the chat window during the live event (such as poll questions, additional resources, etc.) as you plan the event. This will save time and ensure accuracy.
- Email a courtesy reminder to all students one hour prior to the start of the event.

**Seminar Delivery** - a sample of considerations to be accounted for during the live event.

- Be prepared for when the event goes live. Be sure to start recording the event for the benefit of those who are unable to attend the live session.

- Recognize the possibility that some participants might arrive late. For those who do, depending on what they've missed, acknowledge their arrival and inform them where you are on the agenda. If important items have already been covered, encourage them to view the recording of the event to account for what was missed instead of attempting to recapture what was missed.
- Facilitate an event that is less lecture and more engagement. The opening of the seminar should establish the context for what will be covered during the live event, and should prepare the participants for an examination of predefined topics through discussion and other engaging activities.
- Attempt to engage each student in attendance, and routinely pause the activities to ask for questions.
- Opportunities for students to lead activities should be strongly considered. In doing so, faculty should set ground rules and review appropriate presenter etiquette prior to granting such privileges.
- Anticipate the possibility of an unplanned circumstance that might interfere with the delivery of the seminar, such as a power outage or interruption of Internet service.

**Seminar Timeline** - a sample schedule for a 60 minute seminar.

- *First 5 Minutes:*
  - Welcome - when the event opens, welcome and acknowledge those in attendance, greeting students by name.
  - **Social Support** activities might include sharing personal experiences and anecdotes, warm up activities providing support and community-building, all of which are important in building trust and an atmosphere that encourages open communication. Consider using "shout outs" on individual efforts, accomplishments or developments.
- *Next 5 – 10 Minutes:*
  - **Task Management** includes a responsibility for planning work. Begin with a review of the seminar agenda. Leverage the time to discuss the relationship of the learning outcomes with the course content, assignments and assessments, and due dates. This can be accomplished through discussions about current and upcoming asynchronous discussions, assignments, and due dates. Additional guidance might include showing work examples, walking through grading rubrics for

upcoming graded deliverables, highlighting expectations, and sharing available resources.

- *Next 30 - 40 Minutes*
  - **Information Exchange** will include the sharing of course content, asking and answering content-related questions, facilitating discussions, disseminating relevant content, and providing activities to support the course outcomes by using tools that will enhance learning.
  - Opportunities for students to lead activities should be strongly considered. In doing so, faculty should set ground rules and should review appropriate presenter etiquette prior to granting presentation privileges.
- *Final 5 Minutes*
  - Wrap up will include a summary of the salient points made during the seminar, a reminder of any upcoming calendar items, another opportunity to ask questions, and encouragement for direct personal contact with the instructor if warranted.

**Creative Learning Activities** – a list of possible learning activities using the available seminar tools to enhance learning and encourage a participatory learning experience:

- Guide virtual tours of some of the resources offered by the University such as the Library, Academic Support and Career Services resources
- Have students demonstrate how they search for reputable sources from the library
- Watch a short (3-5 minute) video, then have students explain the significance
- Facilitate a debate on a topic or current event that coincides with concepts being covered in the course
- Host short student presentations using the Pecha Kucha method
- Visit credible websites that add value to the course content or career field to engage students
- Host a game or an interactive assessment of course-based knowledge
- Have students share samples of how they have applied new knowledge
- Moderate a debate on a preassigned topic
- Assign partners or small teams to work together to solve hypotheticals presented live by the professor

**Seminar Follow Up Activities** – a list of tasks to be completed after the seminar.

- Post the PowerPoint slides from the seminar as an announcement or in the Virtual Office following the completion of the seminar.
- Send an email message to those students who were not able to attend, acknowledging the release of the PowerPoint slides as well as the availability of the archived recording.
- In the days following the seminar, seek options to reiterate the significance of concepts revealed in the seminar to reinforce their relevance through exchanges with the student group (such as in the unit's discussion).

### References

- Altun, S. A., Kalayci, E., & Avci, U. (2011). Integrating ICT at the faculty level: A case study. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 10(4), 230-240.
- Haythornthwaite, C. (2002) Building social networks via computer networks: Creating and sustaining distributed learning communities. In K.A. Renninger and W. Shumar (Eds.), *Building virtual communities: Learning and change in cyberspace* (pp. 159–209), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hrastinski, S., & Jaldemark, J. (2012). How and why do students of higher education participate in online seminars? *Education and Information Technologies*, 17(3), 253-271. doi: 10.1007/s10639-011-9155-y
- Snowball, J., & Mostert, M. (2010). Introducing a learning management system in a large first year class: Impact on lecturers and students. *South African Journal on Higher Education*, 24(5), 818-831.
- Watts, L. (2016). Synchronous and asynchronous communication in distance learning: A review of the literature. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 17(1), 23-32.