

Online Course Community

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Context: Out of class, algebraic geometry

Keywords: course blog, online discussion

Student Activity Time: variable depending on the student

Students engaged in online discussions about course content and collaboratively worked on problems in an online community for the course.

Introducing the Reflection Activity

In an advanced mathematics course, algebraic geometry, upper-level undergraduate students engaged in an online course community using a WordPress blog platform. The purpose of using such an ongoing community as a reflection activity was to provide a private space in which students could summarize and discuss class content; collaboratively work through problems; and publicly submit homework problems.

At the beginning of the course, the educator introduced students to the idea of the community. In this discussion, he emphasized the purpose and what students could gain from participating in this part of the course. The purpose of this discussion was to help students buy into the idea and encourage them to actively participate. The students were each given full control over the site (full "editorial privileges"). The educator made sure the students were individually comfortable with having their homework submissions shared with others in the class. (This worked because the class was small enough that the dynamics were friendly.) Throughout the term, the students organically engaged in the community by summarizing class content, discussing material, collaboratively working through course-related problems, and publicly submitting homework problems. During this time, the educator was an active participant, but left time for students to answer each other's questions.

Regular participation was a portion of students overall grade, and students were expected to participate in some way every week. Because this course was an advanced course, almost all students actively participated. If the educator noticed someone not participating, he touched base with that person about his or her participation.

In terms of outcomes, this reflection activity provided students with a safe space to grapple with content related to the course as a group. Through this community, there was ongoing reflection by the students (individually and as a community) on the trajectory of the course—connecting content across the term, and also to topics outside the scope of the class. Because students were directly and constantly engaged with the course content, a good deal of material could be discussed out of the classroom, allowing more course content to be covered in depth.

Recreating the Reflection Activity

	Description
1	Introduce the idea and purpose of a course wiki on the first day of the course. Work to get immediate buy-in by all students. Make sure there is an initial burst of activity (including active participation by key students), to prime the students to return regularly to the site.
2	Monitor discussion, and actively participate. If someone isn't participating early on, contact him or her about his or her participation.
3	Grade the reflection activity based on participation throughout the quarter.

In the Words of the Educator: Tips and Inspiration

Work to get students invested in this online course community. It is important to build the community at the very start of the course. I really want them to engage in the class online community because only then will they see the value.

Participate in the online course community. You have to be part of the community, both actively participating and observing. The students must sense that you are part of the discussion, and the course is "taking place" all week, and not just during classroom and office hours.

What was the inspiration for the activity? Moving much of the background learning out of the classroom (for example, through techniques often used in "flipped classrooms") convinced me to try this in an advanced class. There was an added advantage in an advanced class that the students came to the class already caring deeply about the material, and eager to learn (including from each other). Choosing the right platform to do this took some thought. Other possibilities were www.artofproblemsolving.com, a wiki, or proprietary software that the university often uses. The WordPress blog platform had a number of advantages: it is free, easy to learn and use, easy to give everyone complete control, and (special to this subject) an easy way to typeset equations (using "LaTeX").