Designing successful online assignments: 10 tips

As teachers, we wish to engage students in productive learning activities. As learning is not and never will be easy (being the result of made mental effort), designing effective online assignments consists for a large part of motivating your students to invest this effort and to engage in productive interaction. But how to do that?

Contents:
1) Take it seriously
2) Communicate clear expectations
3) Design (small) success experiences
4) Make the activity worthwhile
5) Offer choices
6) Start with a (real) problem and finish with a (real) product
7) Allow ‘identities’ or ‘reputations’ to be built
8) Moderating: be sensitive-responsive
9) Create a ‘safe’ and constructive atmosphere
10) Profit from the different strengths of different tools

1) Take it seriously
In the current educational system students are (taught to be) very sensitive to what their teacher finds important. Thus if you, as teacher, take an online assignment seriously (meaning: committing time and attention to it!), then so will they. Simply offering a forum and saying ‘If you, want, you can also use the discussion board’ will usually not do the trick. Also, our aim should not be to subject our students to the same sort of assignment in every course (whether it is an online discussion, a group paper, a presentation, a case-study or something else). Rather, I would say that (streamlined) didactical pluralism is the key, focusing on your own strengths as a teacher and on the particular goal you are trying to reach. Then, if you decide to employ a certain type of online activity, do it right.

For example: Include the assignment in the course reader and address it in your f2f meetings, for instance by answering questions, identifying good messages and addressing persistent misunderstandings. This shows that how students participate in the online assignment, matters.

2) Communicate clear expectations
Be clear and transparent to your students about your expectations, the evaluation procedure and its criteria, and the guidance they can expect. With collaborative assignments this sometimes seems to be forgotten, as teachers somehow expect ‘magical’ effects from online collaboration. However, if you are used to setting up strict criteria and evaluation procedures for your individual assignments, why not do the same for the collaborative ones?

Furthermore, when moderating online it’s important to avoid confusion. Any doubts about expectations, criteria or procedures may spread like wildfire and will not do the motivation
of your students any good. As confusion will be more difficult to repair online (with its increased ‘distance’) than it is face-to-face, ‘an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure’. Should any confusion still arise, address it directly and clearly.

For example: If you decide not to actively follow or take part in the discussions, tell the students in advance. You could negotiate then how they can get your help and feedback if they need it. If you opt for a time-extensive guidance, for instance, you could agree to answer emails only if students have already made the effort to solve the issue themselves and have formulated a clear and detailed question.

3) Design (small) success experiences
Experiencing success is motivating. It allows students to build confidence, trust and social ties. Just like in any other project, successfully ending (parts of) projects helps participants to get into a habit of collaborating successfully. So, how to design for success? Firstly, you can start with small and concrete tasks or topics and gradually make them more complex and abstract. Secondly, it is important to choose an appropriate group size (based on the specific context and task). For online discussion assignments, for example, working in relatively process small groups (like 3-6) tends to work better than using large groups. Participants will have a better oversight, less risk of miscommunication and more group cohesiveness. Thus, make the group as small as possible while still ensuring a sufficient level of activity. Thirdly, chances of success also greatly depend on the provided amount of structure and support. After each success experience, you can decrease the provided structure and support.

For example: To structure a literature-processing task, you can divide it into two different phases. First, have students discuss the meaning of the text with the goal of really understanding its intended meaning or message. Secondly, let them engage in a more critical discussion, sharing their opinions of this message. Without this staging students are likely to engage into critical debate about a text without sharing a proper understanding of it. Using these different phases will create a more focused discussion with less misunderstanding than when the two forms of conversation are mixed together.

For example: To gradually decrease teacher guiding and support, certain moderating roles can be gradually copied from the teacher’s ‘example behaviour’ and be adopted by the students. Typical teacher behaviour that students easily copy is posing check questions (‘So you mean that...?’) or asking for argumentation (‘Why do you think that...?’). Instead of relying on this to occur naturally, you may also officially assign some moderating tasks to your students. Finally, if students successfully take on responsibility by appropriating certain moderation tasks, you can also reward them (with more freedom, for example in their choice of new content, tasks, or activities).

4) Make the activity worthwhile
In order to be a successful and motivating experience, a collaborative activity must prove itself to be worthwhile. As any other successful activity, the gains need to be higher than
the costs. As we know, online collaboration is very demanding and writing coherent contributions takes more effort than a conversation face-to-face. Thus, as a teacher it is important to keep in mind that the discussion or assignment is still a means to a goal. The goal is not to ‘have discussion’ or to ‘generate a lot of messages’ but to engage students in an active and meaningful processing of the subject matter that leads to deep, appropriated, and applicable understanding!

You can only ensure this usefulness of activity by careful design. Thus, all different activities in a course should be designed to complement each other and to provide an added value. For example, great importance lies in little things such as planning: discussion for deep collaborative literature processing is only useful if students have already individually read the material. Similarly, online discussions and face-to-face meetings should productively build upon each other. A discussion can, for instance, be a preparative activity for a face-to-face meeting so that the teacher can get a glimpse of the conceptions of his or her students beforehand, but it can also be used to let students digest and deepen their understanding of a given lecture. Finally, you can also ask students for feedback on what they experience as useful activities or what practical organization works best for them. In the end, students are responsible for their own learning process and know very well what helps them to learn and what does not.

For example: Use online discussion only for difficult articles that really need it, so that the discussion really offers an added value. This selectivity also applies to the duration of the discussion, as its better to focus online activity in time (specifying, 2 or 3 weeks per article) to ensure a sufficient flow.

For example: If you do not want to evaluate students’ participation in the discussions, you can make the discussion worthwhile by letting them write a position paper at the end of the course that is based on their discussion contributions. Thus, the effort they spend during the course on writing contributions, creating a ‘line of thought’, and refining it based on the received reactions pays off in the creation of their final paper. This way of indirectly evaluating students’ discussion participation is also possible through other means, such as a final presentation or a portfolio.

5) Offer choices
We probably all agree that forcing assignments ‘down students’ throats’ won’t give the best results. In order to avoid this, offering students choices (with associated rewards) can make their motivation more intrinsic. Offering a degree of freedom within a defined assignment, can give the students more feeling of control of their own learning process and can keep them more engaged and committed. Offering choices in subject or activities is also in line with the idea that everyone is different. Stimulating excellence amongst students means allowing and encouraging them to develop their own talents.

For example: Provide students with the possibility to collect a certain amount of ‘points’ by choosing to perform certain activities. These activities should be useful for the process and the group as a whole and could be, for instance, performing different roles in online discussion (chairing, summarizing, etc),

1 While, of course, at the same time this additional effort required to make ideas and argumentation explicit also is what creates its great learning potential.
editing a WIKI, or writing weekly summaries of the face-to-face meetings. In return, students can ‘earn’ some extra privileges such as, for instance, an extra point on their final exam. You can even let students officially ‘sign up’ for these activities in advance, creating a stronger feeling of commitment.

Be aware, however, that with offering more freedom, you will also have to establish clear and transparent boundaries. Formulating explicit criteria will not only guard these boundaries, but will also help you to remain fair and strict, which is always important in maintaining students’ motivation and respect.

The nice thing about offering choices is that it also introduces the idea of negotiation between teacher and student and turns education into a 2-way process. If a student chooses to go for a certain option, then he or she will be ‘rewarded’ in a certain way. When, for instance, looking at the teacher’s feedback as a ‘reward’, it suddenly seems quite normal to attach certain conditions or requirements. Thus, instead of implicitly assuming that the teacher will provide feedback, a more choice-oriented and negotiated process allows the teacher to also pose requirements for his or her input and involvement (which, ultimately, is something that students highly value).

For example: You can say that you will only answer questions that have already been discussed among students themselves and that have been made concrete and specific. Thus, you reward their effort in constructing an explicit question with your effort of responding to it.

6) Start with a (real) problem and finish with a (real) product
To increase the usefulness of an assignment as perceived by the students, you can start with a real practical problem or research question. Studying and understanding the subject matter then becomes a logical and necessary step to answer this question or solve the problem. Thus, you have established the need and relevance of studying the literature in a natural way. Explaining students why the literature that you selected for them is important and relevant is crucial for their motivated participation, but also often forgotten. Of course you have your reasons for carefully choosing certain books or articles for your students to read. These reasons may be a ‘given’ for you as a teacher, but it is always important to make them explicit to your students as well!

For example: Like on discovery channel, try to start your course by presenting a compelling problem or question. This might be a question that research already has solved, but can also be (part of) an actual research question that is currently being addressed in your department. With the latter, you are developing towards more ‘research-based’ education.

To increase motivation and students’ sense of doing something useful, you may also try to make the end product more authentic.

For example: Let students write a column or book review that will be actually be ‘published’ online, for instance by the library or another institution. You can also easily publish something online yourself, these days, using a blog or free provider and a creative common licence. You can ask an official instance, then, to create a link to your students’ product(s).
7) Allow 'identities' or 'reputations' to be built

Building an online 'reputation', for instance as an expert on a certain topic of interest, a constructive helper, or a talented summarizer can be very motivating to students. Lettings students develop their individual talents and positively reinforcing those talents, often is much more effective than only focusing on correcting shortcomings or mistakes. When it comes down to it, identifying a 'wrong' conception in a discussion can often be done just as effectively by pointing out the 'right' one.

For example: Provide students with official 'titles' and responsibilities for different activities, such as the ones mentioned above. Real and successful online communities also use this powerful mechanism. Similarly, you may for instance also hand out awards for 'message of the week', 'best helping behaviour', etc.

8) Moderating: be sensitive-responsive

Many moderators prefer not to be too dominantly active in the discussion, as not to 'kill' discussion amongst students. Although this can happen, I believe it is quite important though to give students a sense of you 'being there'. You can be quite passive, but be responsive when students get stuck or 'off track'. This say, you give the students the confidence that they are going in the right direction and that you are there to help if needed. When intervening, it's generally a good idea to reply with questions that help them just one step further in the right direction. These questions function as 'miniature assignments', aimed to help them to arrive at the next mini-level of understanding (ZPD).

For example: If limited in time, you can even decide not to follow the discussions at all, but to give students the responsibility to contact you when they need help in the discussion. This also may help to establish awareness that teacher attention, and feedback is a valuable thing and that there might be some effort required in order to receive this.

9) Create a 'safe' and constructive atmosphere

Creating a safe learning environment is still very relevant for online assignments. Especially in undergraduate courses, an online assignment will often have the goal of helping students to process difficult subject matter. In this case, 'discussion' or 'debate' have a wrong association that may not be very helpful in reaching this goal. As learning is all about being open to new ideas and conceptions, an atmosphere that is too critical risks 'entrenching' students in their existing ideas. As academics we tend to value critical thinking, but we often forget that this is a higher-order skill. You cannot criticize something which you do not yet understand. In order to facilitate the construction of this understanding, first, a more constructive environment is much more effective. It is important that students engage in 'perspective taking': trying to put themselves in the shoes of someone else (being either their peers or the author they are reading) and try to understand what he or she is trying to convey.

For example: Whereas students will know 'discussion' and 'debate' from everyday life, a true constructive 'conversation-for-learning' will be new to them and you have to explain it. Thus, make it clear to your students what you want and
expect (possibly avoiding the term ‘discussion’), give examples and lead by example.

Another important reason is that in order to remediate any misconceptions, you first need students to express their conceptions. Only in a safe and constructive atmosphere will they feel free to express all their tentative and uncertain ideas. Finally, share all these ‘hunches’ is also essential for their knowledge building process!

For example: Remind and show your students that ‘there is no such thing as a stupid question’ and make it very clear that their contributions will not be evaluated on their accuracy.

10) Profit from the different strengths of different tools
If you make constructive use of specific tools for specific tasks, you can profit from their individual strengths, while compensating their weaknesses. Online discussion, for instance, is useful for deep and reflective conversation but not as strong in converging on shared outcomes. For the latter, a WIKI might be better suited. Chats are useful to get fast feedback, but often are more superficial, while blogs tend to be more personal and less interactive. Rich media provide a lot of information, but also stimulate passive behaviour. The Annotation tool (below), finally, offers specific functionalities for the collaborative close reading of texts and for interactive peer feedback.

![Figure 1. Screenshot of the Annotation tool](www.annotatietool.nl)

Of course, the affordances of different tools only serve as a basis for designing and facilitating successful learning experiences. I hope the previous 9 points have made it clear that making appropriate didactical choices is essential. It may not come as a surprise to you, then, that many tips for ‘good online teaching’ are equally true for ‘good teaching’ in general.

More info (these documents can also be found at [www.annotatietool.nl](www.annotatietool.nl)):
- Annotation tool for [collaborative literature processing](www.annotatietool.nl)
- Annotation tool for [interactive peer feedback](www.annotatietool.nl)
- [Combining tools](www.annotatietool.nl) to take advantage of their strengths and weaknesses

NB This paper is still a work in progress. Please help us to improve it by [sharing your ideas](www.annotatietool.nl)!