

# Assessing Online Learning and Teaching: Adapting the Minute Paper

By Selma Vonderwell

*“Online learning requires the reconstruction of student and instructor roles, relations and practices.”*

## Introduction

Online learning is impacting current university practices and policies and quickly changing the fabric of higher education (Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1998). Effective assessment techniques can improve an instructor’s understanding of student needs and provide a learner-centered classroom. Understanding and evaluating student learning becomes essential specifically when students and instructors cannot see each other. Transactional distance, a communications gap between the instructor and learners due to physical distance (Moore & Kearsley, 1996), may occur in online learning. Classroom assessment strategies and techniques can help instructors close the communications gap that can impede effective online teaching and learning.

## Minute Paper

This article presents the implications of adapting the Minute Paper format in two online classes. The Minute Paper is a classroom assessment technique used for obtaining regular feedback from learners about their learning (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Using the Minute Paper, instructors can benefit from ongoing assessment of classroom learning and of their teaching practices. Student responses and reflections can provide instructors a way to identify learning needs in their classrooms and to improve instruction. Through the use of the Minute Paper, a line of communication is opened between the instructor and learners. Students reflect on their own learning and review and focus on the important aspects of the class content, as well as identify areas for further analysis (Panitz & Panitz, 1999). Angelo and Cross (1993) have suggested using two main questions in the Minute Paper format for classroom assessment:

- a) What is the most important thing you learned today?
- b) What question(s) do you still have in mind?

The first question in the Minute Paper directs learners to focus on what is being learned. The second question seeks to determine how well student learning is proceeding.

## Online journals

The Minute Paper format was applied in the form of weekly online journals in two sections of an online course for preservice teachers, *Technology Applications in Education*. The purposes for implementing online journaling were to receive feedback and check student progress and learning and to evaluate and improve teaching practice and enable student reflection. The questions posed for response in the weekly online journals were:

*“Online journals provided an essential way for the instructor to check student progress and understanding and to improve teaching and learning.”*

- a) What are the most important things you learned this week?
- b) What are the points still remaining that you would like to learn after this week’s activities?
- c) Do you have any suggestions or ideas with respect to the class activities, documents and assignments?

## **Implications**

Implementing online journals for classroom assessment had pedagogical, interpersonal, technological and managerial implications. Online teaching for effective learning requires extensive planning, structuring, time and effort. Providing mechanisms for improved communication and feedback demanded a lot of time and effort on the part of the instructor. The course management system did not allow multi-tasking to create and read or respond to the online journals, which was a limitation to instructor’s use of effective time. However, implementing the online journals helped the instructor assess student learning and her own teaching and opened a communication line between the instructor and the students. Teacher and teaching presence was provided so the students would not feel they were secluded.

The weekly online journals engaged the students in reflective thinking, and allowed the instructor to receive feedback from the students on their learning as well. The individual online journals opened ways for the instructor and the students to improve communication and to personalize teaching and learning. Through continuous assessment of student learning, the instructor felt that she was able to improve the online class learning.

**Pedagogical Implications:** The student journal writings helped the instructor gain insight into how student learning was progressing and what the students needed to achieve better. The online journals allowed the students to reflect on their learning of technology applications and integration in education. One student wrote after the first week in which one of the course activities had involved developing a Web Scavenger Hunt:

I thought this week was very informative work. I had never done a web scavenger hunt before, but I had seen one done in an eighth grade science class before. The class responded very well to the assignment and seemed to really learn some new material. Also it is not the same old lecture format. So I thought this exercise was very informative and helpful for future teachers.

The instructor answered the questions students asked in their online journals and scaffolded student learning. She incorporated activities that emerged from questions and suggestions from the students’ online journals. A Frequently Asked Questions and a Tips & Tools area emerged from answers to students’ questions and their suggestions. One student had suggested creating a bookmark library for everybody in class. This suggestion was later used in the Tips & Tools area to share important websites for preservice teachers.

The first five weeks students were asked to write what they had learned, what was remaining that they hadn’t learned and whether they had any suggestions for the instructor for course improvement. Several students indicated in their journals or email messages that the online journal questions seemed repetitive and too general. The instructor provided students a new set of questions that seemed less general and were geared toward reflecting on integration of technology in the classroom. The questions were changed to:

- a) How do you think you can use this week’s activities and assignments you learned in your classroom either as a class management tool or an instructional tool? (e.g. database, spreadsheet, KidPix)
- b) What are other ways you can extend these activities and assignments

when using computers as a part of your classroom?

- c) Do you have any suggestions or ideas to improve the class?

The second set of the questions allowed students to focus on the issue of how they could integrate technology into their teaching. The questions were more interesting and specific for the students compared to just asking them what they have learned and would like to learn more about. This indicates that the preservice teachers had reached a certain comfort level with technology and had developed an increased interest in technology implementation and integration in their classrooms.

### Interpersonal Implications

The transactional distance that may exist between instructors and students in online learning can be addressed by providing avenues for interpersonal interactions with the students. The instructor tried to create a friendly online learning environment to minimize the existence of transactional distance. Teaching and teacher presence along with concern and acknowledgement of students are important aspects for creating a comfortable learning environment. Opening the communications and feedback lines through interpersonal outreach strategies can help foster a learner-centered environment.

Implementing student journals in the two online classrooms helped the instructor to know her students personally as well as pedagogically. The instructor observed that the students used their online journals as a way to connect with the instructor interpersonally. Students made comments to the instructor and at times asked questions to the instructor within their online journal areas rather than emailing her. Some of the students directed their journal writing to the instructor while some addressed the journal itself as if they were writing a private journal of their own, i.e., "Dear Journal." A student who was having problems with his email used the online journal area as a means of communication between himself and the instructor. The transactional distance that may occur in online learning was reduced through the use of online journals, both pedagogically and interpersonally, so the students did not feel isolated in their endeavor of learning. The instructor was able to improve her teaching from the feedback and interactions with the students.

### Technological and Managerial Implications

The technology available, specifically the course management software, influenced instructor practice. For example, the instructor had to post each online journal individually for each student which required the instructor to spend a great deal of time creating the journal areas, reading entries and providing feedback on each student journal weekly. After the first few weeks of the quarter, the instructor felt that she would respond only to those journals requiring feedback. For the students, writing online journals

each week was also tedious at times especially towards the end of the quarter.

### Conclusion

Online journals provided an essential way for the instructor to check student progress and understanding and to improve teaching and learning. Online learning requires the reconstruction of student and instructor roles, relations and practices. Instructors need to be aware of strategies and techniques they can use for improved communication and formative assessment of teaching and learning. Through adequate adaptation of the Minute Paper format or other classroom assessment techniques in online classrooms, instructors can benefit from ongoing assessment of student learning and their practices.

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