

Step 3

Even though this mini-lesson is going to focus on student-content interactivity, all types of interactivity in an online class are important. For instance, according to Holmberg (2007) students who feel a connection with their instructor have greater motivation and pleasure in their studies. Likewise, many online instructors seek to foster a sense of community among students (student-student interaction) to counteract the feelings of isolation sometimes reported by online students (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). You may dismiss those two points as “that touchy-feely junk” and think, “I don’t care if my students like me or like each other. I’m only interested in whether or not they learn the material.” It’s true that your students don’t *have* to like you in order to achieve mastery in your course (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012), and if you are not concerned whether your students drop out or not, you don’t *have* to worry about fostering student-student interaction (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). In fact, you could decide that for your online class, you will do nothing more than post your PowerPoints and let the course management system run exams. Sigh! There is so much more that you could do. In this step and step 5 we’re going to take a look at four obstacles that might stand in your way and how you might overcome those obstacles.

1. You have never thought about active learning techniques (or student-content interactivity in the online world)—that’s not how you were taught or it isn’t your style. If you’ve never thought about active learning techniques, if you feel that the best way to teach is straight lecture and have your students take notes, you’ve got some catching up to do. Active learning is a hot topic in education today. A recent study (Haake, HilleRisLambers, Pitre, & Freeman, 2011) gave very convincing evidence of the power of active learning techniques to improve student learning outcomes. However, as a newcomer to active learning don’t try to change your entire course at once. Spice up your presentations with a few discussions and see how it goes. Tweak, modify, consider how to improve any rough spots for the next time around, then add more. And, don’t go it alone. Seek the help of colleagues who teach online, use your institution’s resources, read a couple of books on online teaching.
2. You’ve used active learning techniques in your face to face classes, but you have no idea how to translate them to an online class. Good news! Many of them translate very well to an online environment: discussion, role-playing, case studies, small group work, student presentations, and peer review. With imagination and ingenuity, even courses which you might not think could be done online can be. Ko and Rossen (2007) wrote of a successful online speech class. The only additional equipment students needed was a webcam. In the next step we’re going to see a classroom technique modified for online.