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# Strategies for Managing Your Online Teaching Activities

The online learning environment is different from the traditional learning environment in many ways. One important difference is that in a traditional classroom, the time commitment is finite in that most interaction occurs during the class and office hours. In an online environment, the course is available 24/7. The continuous accessibility of the online classroom demands that you develop new time management strategies. How you manage your online course not only affects your workload, it also has an impact on persistence. Learners need to understand the expectations of your course to be successful and avoid frustration from not understanding your requirements. Learners also need opportunities to ask questions to help them understand specific activities. This can take a lot of time, so finding ways to communicate with learners as a group can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your communication and help learners persist. We also understand that learners are managing many different responsibilities in their life, which can cause them to have low interaction, so being able to track and monitor learners' progress is important to help them stay engaged. In this chapter, we look at strategies to help you develop a routine for streamlining your teaching activities, develop effective ways to track learner progress, and manage the increased amount of interaction that you will have with learners.

## SETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR THE COURSE

At the beginning of the course, you will need to spend time interacting with individual learners, answering their questions, and helping them understand what will be expected of them in the course. In an online learning environment, it is critical to set expectations for the course, so learners have a complete understanding of the format and structure of the course, as well as the expectations for engaging in the course (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). Chapter 7 described expectation and orientation scaffolds to help learners understand procedures for the course. These are important tools to help learners understand the layout of the course, how to navigate the course environment, and the expectations for engaging in the course. An expectation scaffold is also an important tool to help you proactively manage expectations of learners and keep them from making inaccurate assumptions about the course. This can reduce the time you have to spend helping learners meet expectations or change their own expectations because of misunderstanding. It can also be used as a tool to remind learners, if issues arise, that you clearly set out expectations at the beginning of the course. It is important that you post your faculty expectations in the discussion and have each learner post a reply to your expectation indicating that he or she understands your expectations and does not have any questions about them.

## DEVELOPING A ROUTINE TO STREAMLINE TEACHING ACTIVITIES

Developing a routine for all of the teaching activities during the course can help you manage your time and effort. By developing a routine, you can control the workload, which can keep you from feeling overwhelmed. Exhibit 15.1 is a time management worksheet that you can use to organize your teaching activities each week and manage your available time.

To begin, consider all of the activities that are involved in teaching your course. Using the template in Exhibit 15.1, keep the listed activities that are relevant to your course, delete the ones that are not, or add additional activities based on the design of your course. Next establish how much time you will need to allocate to accomplish each of the activities. If you are new to teaching, take a best guess. Generally speaking, with an average of 20 learners, an online course can take anywhere from 10 to 15 hours per week; however, that figure varies greatly

**Exhibit 15.1** Time Management Worksheet.

| Example of Course with Units That Begin on Monday and End on Sunday Each Week | Day/Times [Mon.] | Day/Times [Tues.] | Day/Times [Wed.] | Day/Times [Thurs.] | Day/Times [Fri.] | Day/Times [Sat.] | Day/Times [Sun.] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Unit activity setup<br>Unit overviews, due dates, supplemental materials etc.<br>[30 minutes weekly] | | | | | 8:30 AM–9:00 AM | | |
| Posting weekly discussion summaries<br>[15 minutes] | 10:30 AM–10:45 AM | | | | | | |
| Managing discussions<br>E.g., participating in discussions, tracking discussions<br>[2–3 hours weekly] | | 9:00 AM–10:00 AM | | 7:00 PM–8:00 PM | | 11:00 AM–12:00 AM | |
| Grading discussions/ assignments<br>[10 minutes per learner discussion/15 minutes per learner assignment] | 8:30 AM–10:30 AM | 7:00 PM–9:00 PM | | | | | |
| Managing learner questions/issues<br>E.g., e-mail/course mail, question and answer discussion, technical issues discussion<br>[15 minutes daily] | 8:00–8:15 AM<br>4:00–4:15 PM | 8:00–8:15 AM<br>4:00–4:15 PM | 8:00–8:15 AM<br>4:00–4:15 PM | 8:00–8:15 AM<br>4:00–4:15 PM | 8:00–8:15 AM<br>4:00–4:15 PM | 8:00–8:15 AM<br>4:00–4:15 PM | 8:00–8:15 AM<br>4:00–4:15 PM |
| Sending proactive communications<br>[15 minutes per learner] | 8:15 AM–8:30 AM | 8:15 AM–8:30 AM | | | 8:15 AM–8:30 AM | | |

depending on the structure of the course. It is important to track the time it takes for you to complete each of the activities, but remember that over time, you will build efficiencies that will reduce the time you spend on each activity. Continue to update your time allocations as you teach the course from one quarter or semester to the next, and adjust your schedule accordingly.

Next allocate your time throughout the week for the different activities, including setting up the units, managing discussions, managing learner questions and issues, grading discussions and assignments, proactively communicating with learners at risk, posting weekly summaries, and so on. In the template, mark the specific day you will complete the activity. You may also want to include a specific time to better organize your schedule.

### Unit Setup Activities

If your course requires weekly setup, I recommend that you try to set up your course on the Thursday or Friday prior to the start of a new unit of study. This allows learners who are caught up with work to have an extra weekend to work ahead. It also will keep you from having to rush in on the first day of the unit and post information about the activities. You will also need to determine whether you will introduce and close a unit of study. A good strategy is to introduce a unit of study by presenting an overview of the unit. Discuss any issues that you have found that learners have in the studies, and point out ways to overcome them. Once the unit has closed, posting a summary of the unit activities can signal that the unit has officially ended and can provide an opportunity to summarize activities and discussions and post your reflections. If you do not participate in discussions, this is an opportunity to demonstrate to learners your awareness of what took place in the discussion activities. The unit overview can be posted as part of your setup on Thursday or Friday, but I recommend that you post summary discussions following the close of a unit of study.

### Managing Discussion

Discussions can take a lot of time to manage. Creating specific strategies for participating in weekly discussions can help reduce the time you spend responding to individual discussion posts. Consider strategies for how you participate in discussions, how you will monitor instructor-to-learner and learner-to-learner

interactions, and other discussion strategies to reduce the time that you have to spend managing discussions.

There are several strategies you can use to participate in discussions. One strategy is to choose specific discussions to participate in and communicate with learners where you will be interacting. Another is to respond to key discussion posts from learners and weave themes or point out areas where learners are not on target. You can also interact with different learners in different discussions, and make sure that you interact with every learner at least once.

You may also want to consider a strategy of learners' taking on the role of moderator in the discussion, which alleviates the need for you to engage in discussions. Your role can move to monitoring the discussions to make sure they are on target and provide feedback to the moderator to keep the discussion focused and engaged. As discussed earlier, if you choose not to participate in discussions, a discussion summary can help demonstrate your awareness of what took place during the discussions, give learners your personal perspective, and point out any misunderstandings of the topic. The important thing is to communicate to learners the strategies you will be using. Once you have an understanding of how you will engage in the discussion, you can determine how much time to allocate to participate in them.

You may want to develop a system for tracking learners' responses to discussions, as well as interactions you have had with individual learners in the discussion and other important information to help you manage the discussions and reduce the time needed each week to grade discussions. Exhibit 15.2 is a sample of a spreadsheet you can use to track discussions. For each discussion, post a score for the quality of a learner's discussion post based on the discussion-grading rubric you are using. Include comments regarding the quality of the response and make notes if you ask the learner to elaborate on something. Include comments if you have received communications from learners indicating they are sick, out of town, or have other reasons that they cannot participate in the discussion. Also include communications from learners indicating problems they are having with understanding the materials or activities for the unit. This will help you develop a clear understanding of how the learner is doing and where to focus your feedback to learners when you grade discussions at the end of a unit. It also will remind you of communications from learners regarding not being able to participate, so

**Exhibit 15.2** Course Roster and Tracking Spreadsheet.

| Learner Name | Learner E-mail | Unit 1 Discussion 1 | Comments | Unit 1 Discussion 2 | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| E.g., Tom Jones | | 3 points | Excellent response | 3 points | Excellent response |
| E.g., John Smith | | | Father died—out of class this week | | |
| E.g., Jane Johnson | | 1 point | Short response; no arguments; no evidence; sent e-mail that she does not understand the discussion question.<br>Posted to discussion and asked her to elaborate on arguments, evidence. Gave her concrete examples of how to do this. | | |
| Learner | | | | | |
| Learner | | | | | |
| Learner | | | | | |
| Learner | | | | | |
| Learner | | | | | |
| Learner | | | | | |

you do not end up sending communications at the end of a unit asking why they did not participate in the discussion.

### Grading Discussions and Assignments

By being organized and using tools to help you manage discussions, you will be able to allocate less time to grading discussions. At the beginning of a course, learners do not have a sense of your grading style and may be unsure whether they are meeting your expectations in discussions. Providing feedback frequently during the first few weeks of the course can help learners understand the extent to which they are meeting the discussion requirements. Once learners have an understanding of your grading, you can post grades for discussions to a grade book (if available) and reduce the number of times you send out individual written feedback. Encourage learners to become more independent and use the grading rubrics and scoring guides, as well as the feedback they have received from you on past discussions, to evaluate their own performance. For assignments, I recommend that you give detailed feedback along with a grade each time, and try to return feedback within 48 to 72 hours. Feedback templates can help reduce the amount of time you spend grading discussions and assignments, discussed in detail in an upcoming section of the chapter.

### Managing Learner Questions and Issues

Much of your time can be taken up communicating to individual learners about questions they have regarding course activities. There are several communication strategies that can help you organize and reduce the number of such individual communications, including question-and-answer threads, technical question discussions, and frequently asked question posts.

Although learners often have the same questions, they e-mail you separately about them. Posting a question-and-answer discussion thread such as "Ask Your Instructor" is an effective strategy to encourage learners to ask questions. By posting them to a public discussion thread, all learners are able to read each question and your reply, which will reduce the number of individual replies you need to make. When you receive individual questions that are not specific to an individual learner, copy and paste the question or issue and your response into your "Ask Your Instructor" discussion. This can help prevent this same question being asked again by another learner. Encourage learners to review posts to the

"Ask Your Instructor" discussion before asking questions to see whether it was already answered, as well as to review other questions and answers that may be helpful to them.

Many learners have technical issues throughout the course, so providing a space for asking questions related to technical issues can help communicate answers to common technical issues in the course. A separate thread can also allow you to bring in a technical support person to monitor and answer questions that you may not have the expertise to answer. You may also provide a link to your technical support site in the discussion, so learners can quickly get answers to questions that you are unable to answer.

Frequently asked question (FAQ) documents are another excellent way to answer questions proactively. As you teach a course several times, you will begin to get an understanding of the kinds of questions and specific issues that occur during learning activities. Developing a FAQ document that answers some of the most frequently asked questions can be helpful. Documenting all questions asked throughout the course can help you regularly update your FAQ document. It can also be used to reflect on the course activities and help you determine important edits that need to be made to resolve issues that frequently occur in the course. You may want to post the FAQ document to the "Ask Your Instructor" thread, so it is handy for learners to review prior to asking a question.

Most course management systems have a built-in mail feature. In order to manage the number of communications from learners in a course, use this feature in your course and communicate with learners that this will be the main tool for communicating privately with them throughout the course. Many of the available course mail tools allow you to forward any mail that comes into the inbox of the course mail to your regular mail, which will allow you to see immediately when you have mail in the course. They do not allow you to reply to the mail from your regular e-mail account, so you will need to log into the course to reply. The benefit of using this tool is to track all learner correspondences. If your course management system does not have a course mail system or you prefer your regular e-mail, you may want to consider creating a rule that automatically moves incoming e-mail from a distribution group to a specific folder. In the tools menu you can create rules and add all of your learners to a distribution group, so they are automatically organized into a single folder. This will allow you to manage learner e-mails more efficiently and allow you to track individual

learner communications. This can be especially important if a learner challenges a grade at the end of the course or files a complaint, because it will help you organize learner communications that you may need to demonstrate you clearly communicated the learner's standing in the course.

Another option is to use private discussion threads for learner communications. Most course management systems allow you to designate a discussion as private or public. At the beginning of the course, you can set up private discussions for each learner and post all of your communications to their private discussion thread. The advantage of this type of communication strategy is that you can organize your communications with unique threads for different types of communications. For instance, you can have a private question thread, a thread for feedback on discussions and assignments, and a thread for announcements, to name a few. Compiling all of the communications to and from an individual learner can also help you if you are trying to determine how to manage a particular learner issue. It allows you to review what you have discussed with the learner and make recommendations to help him overcome issues.

### Managing Proactive Communications

You will need to manage proactive communications that you send out each week. It is important to send proactive communications weekly to all learners who do not participate in discussions or turn in assignments. Prior to grading discussions and assignments, determine which learners did not interact in discussions or did not turn in assignments. You can review your tracking spreadsheet for any communications from inactive learners, indicating a reason for their absence. For learners who have not communicated with you, send out a communication (Exhibit 15.3) to each learner that indicates the activities they did not participate in and the time line for completing them and submitting them for a grade. It is very important to be specific about the time line and what will happen if learners are not able to turn in late work within the agreed-upon time line.

You will also need to consider sending proactive communications to at-risk learners. Exhibit 15.4 describes the components for proactive communicating with at-risk learners. For learners who are not participating, I recommend that you send them the weekly communications that we discussed and if they do not respond to your communications after a week, send them a more formal communication. Be specific about the issue and their current standing in the

## Exhibit 15.3 Late Work Communication Example

Hi John,

We have finished the activities for Unit 3 and it appears that you were not able to participate in the activities for this unit. There were two graded activities, the Unit 3 Discussion on the use of deception in research and the Unit 3 Assignment, which is a draft of issue paper.

I will accept your initial post to the discussion question and the draft of your paper through midnight, Wednesday, September 15, 2010. If you do not turn them in by that date and you do not communicate with me regarding your ability to make that deadline, your grade for these activities will become 0 and you will not have another opportunity to make up the grades.

Please let me know how you are doing and if there are any issues or concerns that you are having that are keeping you from actively engaging in the course. I am here to support you☺

Dr. Smith

course. There are additional issues that you may want to formally communicate with learners about. These include writing issues, failing grades, or technology issues that are putting the learner at risk of not passing the course. This template should be used to communicate with learners after you have reached out to them informally to help them with the issue they are having. An "at risk" communication is a stronger message to learners. It should include a description

**Exhibit 15.4** At-Risk Proactive Communication Template.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Type of issue** | Include a heading that indicates the type of issue you are communicating about:<br>Nonparticipation<br>Failing grades<br>Writing issues<br>Technology issues |
| **Details of issue and previous solutions recommended** | Describe the issue in detail, including any solution strategies that you have previously recommended. |
| **Actions needed** | Describe what actions need to be taken by the learner to overcome issue. |
| **Time line** | Include a specific time line for resolving issue. |
| **Results** | Describe what will happen if appropriate actions are taken.<br>Describe what will happen if appropriate actions are not taken. |
| **Name and e-mail address** | Include your name and e-mail address. |

of the issue and details about the issue, including any recommendations you have previously made to help the learner resolve the issue. Also describe specifically what actions need to be taken, the time line in which they must be taken, and the results of what will happen if they are taken or not taken. By proactively communicating with learners you can provide them with specific information about the issue and how to resolve it and make it clear what the results will be if they do not take action. This will protect you at the end of the course if learners come back and state they had no idea there was a problem or that they were never told they were failing the course.

## TEMPLATES FOR MANAGING INSTRUCTOR INTERACTIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS

The first time you teach a course online is the most time consuming. If you set up your interactions using basic templates, you will be able to communicate more effectively and efficiently with all learners in a reasonable amount of time. As you teach the course over several quarters or semesters, you can reuse the templates and continue to enhance them. In addition, you can personalize communications by weaving specific information from the current course into an existing template.

Part 3 of the book describes the use of learning scaffolds to support learners as they engage in learning activities. Worksheets, templates, and worked examples can support learners as they engage in activities. They can also help reduce the time you will spend answering individual questions regarding specific learning activities. In addition to the worksheets, templates, and worked examples, consider additional strategies for managing learning activities such as unit overviews, grading rubrics, and feedback templates.

### Unit Overviews

Unit overviews can easily be reused each time you teach the course and are an excellent way for you to support learners as they begin a unit of study (Exhibit 15.5). Begin your overview by stating something positive about the behaviors you have seen with learners in general. For instance, you may want to say, "I really enjoyed the discussion last week and appreciate that you are getting into the discussions early and extending the dialogue with your peers. There

were multiple perspectives shared and I appreciated how everyone used their critical thinking skills as you engaged in the discussion." If you post a summary of the discussion each week, then you do not need to go any further into the previous week. If not, then you may want to provide a little more detail about the multiple perspectives that were shared and any issues that learners had in general, along with your perspective on the issue. Next connect the previous unit with the upcoming unit. If you are introducing a new topic or project, offer a general overview of the topic or project and provide a high-level review of the upcoming units involved. You can then describe each of the individual activities for the unit, pointing out important resources, due dates, and time estimates if you have them. If you have taught the course before, point out any issues learners had in the past and recommend ways to keep learners from having the same issues. Close by encouraging learners to contact you if they have any questions or issues. Once a unit of study has ended, I recommend that you go back to your unit overview and add any information in your details of the unit activities based on the issues learners had. The next time you teach the course, you will have

**Exhibit 15.5** Components of Unit Overview.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Introduction** | Begin by encouraging learners about the behaviors they have been demonstrating.<br>E.g., "I really enjoyed the discussion last week and appreciate that you are getting into the discussions early and extending the dialogue with your peers." "There were multiple perspectives shared and I appreciated how everyone used their critical thinking skills as you engaged in the discussion." |
| **Summary of Previous Unit** | If you do not post an individual summary at the end of each unit, include a summary of the previous unit. |
| **Connect Previous Unit to Current Unit**<br>**Make Transition to New Topic or Project** | Connect what learners did in the previous unit to the current unit and show how they fit together.<br>If the unit is a transition to a new topic, discuss the transition to the new topic.<br>If the unit is a transition to a new project, describe the project, along with an overview of the units the project will cover. |
| **Unit Activity Description** | Describe each learning activity.<br>Describe resources learners will use to complete activities.<br>Discuss the due date for each activity.<br>If you have time estimates for activities, describe a time line for completing each of the activities.<br>If you have taught the course in the past, point out anything about the topic or activity that previous learners have had issues with and suggest ways to prevent learners from having the same issue. |
| **Closing** | Encourage learners to contact you if they have questions or issues. |

your unit overview complete and you can simply change the information in the introduction to personalize it.

### Grading Feedback Templates

Grading rubrics can help you provide timely feedback to learners. Rubrics are a quick way to give learners specific feedback and allow you to develop consistent grading practices from one learner to the next. A grading rubric feedback template can help you develop individual feedback and manage the actual time it takes to provide individual feedback to every learner. Exhibit 15.6 is an example of a grading rubric feedback template.

Along with feedback on the criteria in the grading rubric, additional personal feedback can provide more information regarding the specific issues with the learner's work.

Detailed feedback should include

- Specifics of where the learner excelled
- Specifics of where the learner needs improvement
- Actionable ways to improve performance
- Final positive statement on learner's behavior

Begin with specific details regarding where the learner excelled. Next, discuss areas where the learner can improve and include specific, actionable ways to improve performance. End with a final positive statement regarding the learner's behavior to encourage and motivate them. Follow up with a positive statement about their behavior to leave them feeling good about themselves and with specific actionable ways they can continue to improve their performance. If you develop templates with specific types of responses, you can easily copy and paste specific comments into your grading rubric template, which can save time developing individual feedback for learners' assignments.

### Microsoft Word Forms

You can also create feedback templates with Microsoft Office 2007 Word forms. A form allows you to include general information that you will use in all

**Exhibit 15.6** Grading Rubric Feedback Template.

| Criteria | Performance | Comments | Comment Choices |
|---|---|---|---|
| Criteria 1<br>E.g., states a position with at least 3 arguments that are supported by evidence | Level of performance on grading rubric<br>E.g., nonperformance, basic, proficient, distinguished | *Specific feedback on performance including:*<br>Where learner excelled on criteria<br>Where learner needs improvement<br>Actionable ways to improve on criteria | *Where learner excelled:*<br>You did a great job of analyzing the issue.<br>You did a good job of stating your position on the issue.<br>You did a great job of weaving the multiple perspectives on this issue into your line of reasoning.<br>*Where the learner needs improvement:*<br>Please try to incorporate more arguments to support your position along with evidence.<br>You can do this by analyzing specific arguments made in the readings and the evidence used to support the arguments.<br>As you continue to build your critical thinking skills, consider using a number of different pieces of evidence from a variety of sources to support your arguments.<br>You can do this by finding additional resources on the issue in peer-reviewed journals and looking at the evidence experts use to support their arguments. Also consider data and real-world examples to support your arguments.<br>As you continue to build your understanding of the issue, look at underlying assumptions, as well as the implications for following your line of reasoning.<br>To do this, ask yourself what things have to be true for this argument. Ask yourself if someone follows my line of reasoning, what impact it will have immediately and in the future. Also, ask yourself how and where the impact will be felt (persons, places, things). |
| Criteria 2 | | | |
| Criteria 3, etc. | | | |
| Overall Comments:<br>Address learners by name and give an overall comment on their performance. Sign your comment with your name and make sure that your last comment motivates the learner to want to improve his or her performance. | | | E.g., Jim, I really appreciate the effort you have put into this assignment. Please be sure to review my individual comments above for how you can continue to improve on the grading criteria. I look forward to your continued growth!<br>Dr. Jones |

communications and specific information based on criteria that you use to grade discussions or assignments. For instance, when grading discussions, you may grade learners based on the quality of their response to the discussion, the number of learners they interact with, spelling and grammar errors, number of days in the course, and so forth. For each of these variables, you can create

## Exhibit 15.7 Microsoft Word Form for Discussion Feedback

Hi [insert learner name],

This week's discussion asked you to consider the issue of the use of deception in research and describe your position on this issue, using arguments and evidence to support your position.

Choose an item (drop-down menu).
Choose an item (drop-down menu).
Choose an item (drop-down menu).
Choose an item (drop-down menu).
Choose an item (drop-down menu).
Choose an item (drop-down menu).

Please let me know if you have any questions. I appreciate your efforts☺ [insert instructor name]

drop-down menus that allow you to choose the appropriate feedback to learners. Exhibit 15.7 shows an example of a discussion feedback form.

You will see in the template that there are six "Choose an item" elements, which are drop-down menus from which you can choose the response that fits the learner's performance in the discussion.

The choices include

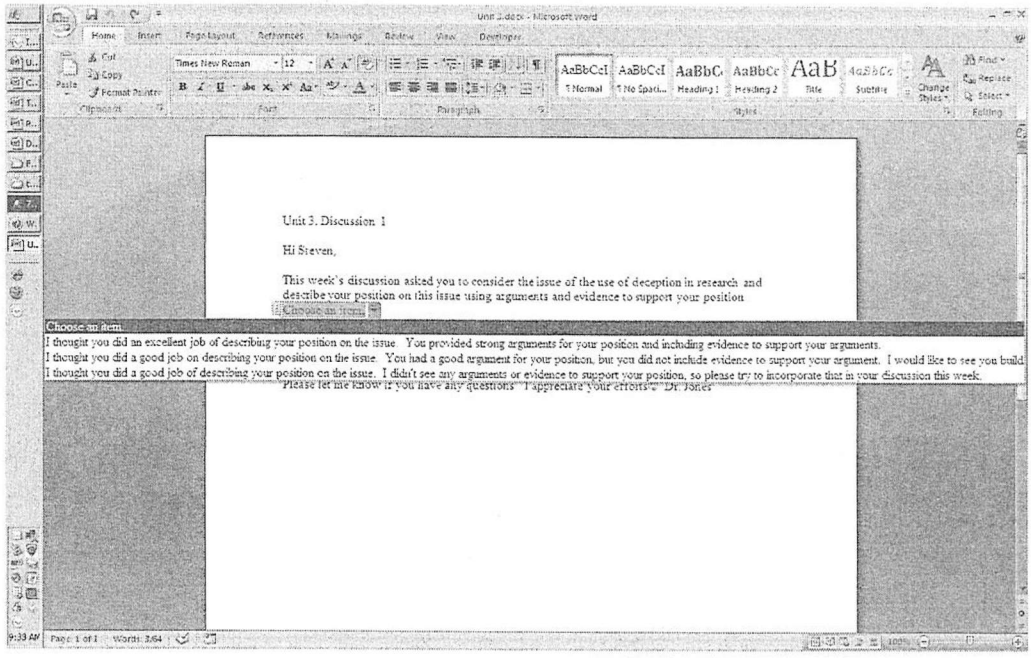
- The quality of the learner's initial post to the discussion question.
- The quality of the learner's interactions with other learners.
- The number of points he or she received for the discussion.
- The next three include choices for point deductions.

The first one describes the quality of the initial post to the discussion. There are several choices, as shown in Figure 15.1.

Once you select all of the drop-down menu choices, your form is complete. Exhibit 15.8 demonstrates the completed feedback form.

It takes time to create the forms, but once you have developed them, you can use them repeatedly each time you teach the course. It is very easy to add choices to the list, so you can easily accommodate additional response types as you grade and find that the current choices do not fit. One caveat is that if you paste

**Figure 15.1** Microsoft Form—"Choose an Item".




## Exhibit 15.8 Microsoft Form—Completed

Hi Cheryl,

This week's discussion asked you to consider the issue of the use of deception in research and describe your position on this issue, using arguments and evidence to support your position. I thought you did an excellent job of describing your position on the issue. You provided strong arguments for your position and included evidence to support your arguments.

I appreciate the interactions you had with other learners and thought you did a great job of using your critical thinking skills.

You received 9/9 points for this discussion and I have recorded it in the grade book.

Please let me know if you have any questions. I appreciate your efforts☺ Dr. Jones

your form into a Word document, the drop-down menu choices will appear. You should complete the form and paste it into an e-mail, so the drop-down menus are not visible or clickable. To access information on how to create a form in Microsoft Office 2007, click on the question mark in the upper right-hand corner

of a new Word document and use the search string "Create forms," and you will find a link to how to "Create a form that users complete in Word." Follow the directions for inserting a "drop-down list" to create the different choices of wording in your feedback template. Once you have completed your form, you can use it as a template to create forms for all of the feedback you will give on specific activities. You can simply delete fields that are not applicable and add new ones that reflect the type of feedback you want to give.

## COURSE PLATFORM CAPABILITIES

Course platforms have a number of capabilities that will help you gain efficiency in managing your online course. Two features that I find the most valuable are the grading features and tracking reports.

### Grading Features

Three grading tools that can save you time are the discussion grading tool, assignment submission and grading tool, and the grade book. Many course management platforms have a discussion grading tool that allows you to pull up all of the responses from an individual learner in a discussion and evaluate the quality of responses and interactions with other learners. You can enter a grade for a discussion that is automatically populated in the grade book. You can also send course mail with feedback from the discussion grading tool. An assignment box tool allows learners to submit assignments in one location, and you can grade assignments and send feedback to learners within the tool. The assignment grade automatically populates in the grade book. The grade book feature allows you to track enrollment of learners, enter grades, and automatically calculate midterm and final grades for individual learners. Many also have statistical features that allow you to look at the distribution of grades to determine the overall performance of learners. The release feature allows you to release the grade as soon as you have entered it or you can release it once you have finished grading all of the learners' assignments.

### Tracking Data

Many platforms have built-in tracking reports that can help you determine how active learners are in your course. Reports often include information such as

overall course activity, tool usage, course items that are being used, course entry and exit pages, frequency of use of specific files, as well as detailed activity of individual learners. When learners enter the course environment, you can track which content areas they access, how much time they spend in each area, what documents they have viewed and compiled, and if they have read e-mails or accessed their grades. I use tracking data to determine the last time a learner has been in the course. If learners have not accessed the course for a period of time, it would not make sense to try to communicate via the course mail feature. A better choice would be to send communications via their personal e-mail. I also use tracking data when learners communicate with me that they are confused and do not understand what to do. One of the first things I look at is where the learners have been in the course and the amount of time they have spent in different content areas. Often I find that confused learners spend the majority of their time in the discussions. They spend a lot of time compiling all of the discussion posts but very limited time in the learning unit where the content is found. This may indicate a learner who is trying to figure out what to post by looking at other learners' posts instead of spending the needed time going through the content in the learning unit. By reviewing learners' interactions in the course, I can make recommendations to view specific resources they have not viewed and spend more time in the learning unit prior to trying to respond to discussions and assignments.

It also allows me to track the amount of time the learner is spending in the course and the number of times per week he or she is logging into the course. Throughout the years of teaching online, I have found a direct correlation between the number of days and hours a learner spends in the course and his or her final grade. Learners who spend the most time in the course generally get higher grades than learners who engage in the course less frequently.

Prior to teaching online, review all of the capabilities of your course platform and consider the features that fit your course structure. If these features are not available to you in your course management system, you will want to develop strategies to track and communicate learner progress in the course.

Before you begin to teach online, you may want to consider creating a course management plan that takes into consideration some of the strategies that have been discussed in this chapter. The more time you can take before the course

begins developing specific strategies and routines for managing your online course, the more efficient and effective you can be in facilitating it. In addition, how you manage your online course can have a direct impact on persistence because it will allow you to streamline activities in order to demonstrate presence in the course, help learners overcome issues, and provide them with quality feedback to help them continue to improve their performance.