



# Workload Reduction in Online Courses: Getting Some Shuteye

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Instructors are a key component of any successful facilitated, asynchronous online course (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004) because they—

- Provide the infrastructure for learning, including the syllabus, calendar, communication tools, and instructional resources.
- Model effective participation, collaboration, and learning strategies.
- Monitor and assess learning and provide feedback, remediation, and grades.
- Troubleshoot and resolve instructional, interpersonal, and technical problems.
- Create a learning community in which learners feel safe and connected and believe their contributions are valued.

Accomplishing these outcomes is labor and time intensive. But what choice is there? Without a high level of instructor and social presence (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), learners can feel isolated and disengaged because of a lack of communication intimacy and immediacy (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). In fact, learners' isolation and lack of support from the learning community is a main cause of attrition in online courses (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

One way for an instructor to achieve presence is to be online constantly. Besides being impractical, this can lead to questionable instructional quality and eventual instructor burnout. It also discourages other instructors from participating (DiBiase, 2004; Wolcott & Betts, 1999). Luckily, there is an alternative to being constantly online. In conjunction with the use of an instructional design process that avoids the inevitable pitfalls of poorly designed online courses (see Rosenberg, 2001; Rossett, 2002; Schank, 2002), there are instructional strategies that can help achieve presence without requiring that an instructor be online all the time: course orientation and management; assessment of learners during online activities; and discussion facilitation and management (see Figure 1).

## Strategies for Course Orientation and Management

Workload reduction starts with anticipating and proactively addressing learners' questions and potential problem areas.

### Which Way Is Up?

Some avoidable instructor workload stems from unclear or incomplete expectations, projects, grading, policies, activity schedule, and so on. The instructor must build in sufficient support, directions, and guidelines for online learners (Hara & Kling, 1999; Huang, 2002; Ko & Rosen, 2004). Strategies for reducing the additional workload include the following:

- Providing project and schedule details at the start of the course
- Asking learners to post any questions about the course by the end of the first week, and updating course materials to include the points of clarification
- Making the course available to learners a few days before the beginning of the course so they can grow accustomed to the site and materials
- Using a “scavenger hunt “ during the first week to make sure learners read the materials and understand the course requirements and expectations. The scavenger hunt may pose questions such as, “Where will project grades be posted throughout the semester?” or “How many times will you need to review group members using the Group Review form?”

### Responding to Concerns Before They Escalate

Online instructors need to create safe environments for learners to express themselves, share their ideas, and ask questions (Huang, 2002), or learner concerns can escalate into significant problems. A variety of ways for learners to communicate with the instructor should be provided. For example, a weekly survey gives learners opportunities to ask questions and voice concerns. Anonymous web forms, instead of email, allow learners more freedom to share concerns they might otherwise not disclose. Provide learners with specific questions to answer, such as—

- What questions or problems came up this week that will require further investigation (or that you'd just like to know more about)?

WORKLOAD REDUCTION STRATEGIES	Course Orientation & Management	Assessment of Learners During Online Activities	Discussion Facilitation & Management
1. Provide clear and complete course syllabus and materials.	✓		
2. Respond to concerns before they escalate into more work.	✓		
3. Do not allow late work or extra credit.	✓		
4. Use karma points to involve learners in the evaluation of discussion contributions.		✓	
5. Provide learners with devices for reviewing each others' work.		✓	
6. Ask learners to develop “rules of engagement” contracts and determine the ramifications of contract violations.		✓	
7. Allow learners to engage in discussion for a few days without instructor input.			✓
8. Ask learners to summarize discussions.			✓
9. Limit the number of discussion questions posted.			✓
10. Ask small groups of learners to facilitate discussions.			✓
11. Encourage learners to ask and answer their own questions.			✓
12. Connect learners to existing communities of practice.			✓
13. Meet synchronously with small groups of learners each week (when there are more than 30 learners in the course).			✓

**Figure 1. Summary of Workload Reduction Strategies.**

- Are you experiencing any problems with key course activities—discussion, group work, or projects? What are your suggestions for improving these activities?
- What did you learn from the activities completed this week?
- What activity was the most useful for you this week? Why?
- What activity was the least useful for you this week? Why? How would you improve it?

These question-and-answer communiqués can be formed into a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document to benefit the entire learning community.

Another way to address learners' concerns is to be available via phone or online at specific times each week. For example, an instructor can establish a “Fireside Chat” time using synchronous chat technology. Sometimes it is quicker to take care of an issue synchronously than to resolve it asynchronously via email or a threaded discussion. Another advantage of this tactic is that learners have a chance to directly interact with the instructor, which can help them feel less isolated and more connected to the instructor and the course.

### Criteria for Karma Points

Here is how we will assign our allotment of karma points for each discussion:

- 0 points: Although an interesting idea was contributed to the discourse, it is not original enough, or is somehow unclear.
- 1 point: A succinct, interesting, original, and well-documented argument or idea, or a useful link or pertinent fact, is contributed.
- 2 points: The contribution is creative and original, and compellingly argues a very clear point. Contribution is supported with evidence.
- 3 points: An exceptional contribution to the discourse, one that really opens eyes and encourages a lively discussion/debate. Exemplary in all respects.

Ways to Improve Chances of Receiving Karma Points:

- Choose provocative subject lines to make postings stand out.
- Present our own perspectives.
- Write clearly.
- Construct an argument. Provide evidence, present a rationale that supports the position, and reference the opinions of others, linking to supplementary evidence when appropriate.
- Open up debate by remembering that the best response is one that gets people thinking, and that makes them want to reply.
- Learn from others who have posted before us by reading through the posts and referring to appropriate posts in our own.

Rules for Assigning Karma Points:

- Only award karma points to those who have contributed significantly to the discussion—vote trading is unacceptable. The awarding of karma points should be based on the quality of the message, irrespective of the content of the message.

increasing instructor workload. Provided below are additional self-assessment approaches that can help reduce workload while enhancing the learning experience.

### Instant Karma's Gonna Get You

Learners are unlikely to participate in discussion if they perceive it as a marginalized or supplemental activity (Anderson, 2004), so participation in online discussions must be evaluated and appropriately rewarded (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Karma points, an approach used by members of the Slashdot.org community (and not unlike the rating systems used by eBay.com and Amazon.com), allow learners to evaluate the quality of discussion contributions. The learning community—not a moderator or an instructor—uses karma points to award postings deemed valuable. Each learner is given a certain number of karma points to assign to valued discussion contributions within a certain timeframe. Karma points learners accumulate can be used to determine a score for class participation.

**Figure 2. Example of Karma Points Criteria.**

A firm “no late work accepted” policy can decrease workload by reducing the likelihood of having to attend to students playing catch up. Also, avoid using extra credit projects as a means of making up lost points. These projects require additional time to evaluate and are typically ancillary to the current learning objectives.

## Strategies for Assessing Learners During Online Activities

Providing frequent, timely, and thoughtful feedback on learners’ work can be a big drain on instructors’ time. Yet it is such an important part of the learning process that its value cannot be ignored. First, because online learners tend to feel isolated and disconnected from the institution, the instructor’s and the other learners’ feedback can be an excellent way of countering those feelings of isolation (McIsaac, Blocher, Mahes, & Vrasidas, 1999). In addition, lack of feedback can slow learners’ progress because they question their understanding of the material, leading to frustration and anxiety (Hara & Kling, 1999).

Self-assessment tools can help learners determine for themselves if they are meeting course objectives (Lynch, 2002). Self-assessment methods include providing quizzes that test understanding and provide immediate feedback, worked examples that illustrate different approaches to problems, and practitioner or expert solutions to compare work against. These types of self-assessments address learners’ need for feedback and build their confidence about their progress and accomplishments without

Encourage learners to establish criteria for determining value and then apply the criteria to their assessment of peers’ contributions and the creation of their own contributions. For example, karma point criteria may include sharing original ideas, presenting a coherent argument, and so on (see Figure 2). Karma points’ community-centered focus improves the quality of each post because learners are more reflective and thoughtful about their responses, support their responses with evidence, and work hard to provide value to the learning community by moving the discussion forward. Karma points can inspire lively dialogue, as they are assigned to postings even if learners share opposing views. Because learners assume part of or the entire evaluation role, instructors are able to think more about their own discussion contributions.

### Power to the People

A common characteristic of online education is learner independence and personal responsibility for educational outcomes and processes, but not all learners are prepared for such ownership (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). To help learners take ownership, instructors can give them rubrics, tools, checklists, guidelines, and other devices for reviewing each other’s work and train them to use these devices effectively (see Figure 3). The process of reviewing someone else’s work can help learners reflect on and articulate their own views and ideas, ultimately improving their own work (Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003). An additional benefit for learners is that they receive a perspective other than the instructor’s, which can provide further insight (Ko & Rossen, 2004). Instructors benefit because they do not have to evaluate every product every time.

## Making Teamwork Work

One workload-reduction strategy that a number of instructors use in both online and face-to-face courses is group projects. Besides increasing interactivity, this approach helps instructors manage their workload because, instead of evaluating 25 individual learner projects, they may only evaluate five group projects (McIsaac et al., 1999). It can be a great instructional strategy for several reasons:

- Group work can help counter the isolation.
- Exposing learners to multiple perspectives can open their eyes to diverse ideas.
- Learners can achieve higher expectations with collegial support.
- The quality of individual learner work can be enhanced through collaboration.

However, a poor assessment structure for group projects can lead to a lot more work when the instructor has to figure out how to evaluate individual learners' contributions.

Have teams establish a formal agreement describing how team members will work together (Hurst & Thomas, 2004). A "Rules of Engagement" contract is especially important for learners who have had negative past experiences in which they had to cover for team members who did not contribute. In the contract, each team can determine what to do if a team member cannot fulfill his or her obligations. This contract should include information on such things as—

- Who will post deliverables?
- Who will lead the group during various projects?
- How will members communicate with each other? How often? Will they set interim deadlines?
- How will work be distributed?
- What is the preferred work style?
- What are the consequences for not getting work done?
- What are the known problems?

Learners use the team agreements to assess each group member's contribution (including their own contribution) to the project. (Figure 4 is an example of a tool learners adopted to assess each other's contributions to group projects.) These assessments can have ramifications, such as 20% score reduction for individuals who receive less than 50 points from more than one team member. This empowers learners to have a say in the point distribution on group projects. This review process also functions as an incentive for all group members to fulfill their obligations. And it helps reduce workload in the following ways:

- Group Review Forms summarize the project work and minimize the amount of time an instructor needs to spend examining private group discussions.

Cast Your Vote for Best Project 3 Proposal

For each question be sure to indicate which group's proposal you are voting for (Group A, B, C, or D).

Your Name:	<input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>
1. Which proposal is most convincing/persuasive? Why?	<input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>
2. Which proposal is most creative? Why?	<input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>
3. Which proposal will have the biggest positive impact for students if implemented? Why?	<input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>
4. Which proposal was the best researched? Why?	<input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>
5. Which proposal was the clearest and most comprehensive? Why?	<input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>
6. Which proposal gets you most excited about the possibilities of distance/online education for you and your district? Why?	<input style="width: 90%;" type="text"/>

**Figure 3. A Peer Review Form for Assessing Project Quality.**

- It alerts the instructor to specific group and group member problems. This allows the instructor to address the issues quickly and efficiently.
- Often, when given the means and opportunity, learners provide thoughtful and detailed feedback to group members and are honest about their own contributions. The reviews provide the instructor with useful comments that can be included in feedback to individual learners.

## Strategies for Facilitating and Managing Discussions

In online courses, discussions play a critical role in clarifying understanding, sharing multiple perspectives, and providing feedback. Subsequently, facilitating discussions is the single most time-consuming and effort-intensive component of an online course. In an online learning environment, specifically one relying on asynchronous communication tools, learners can feel neglected unless the instructor responds directly to their posts. Learners want to know that the instructor and other students value the time and energy they have put into researching and writing a response. They want to know if their response is correct or at least on the right track. If instructors do not complete the interaction loop by responding to each post, learners can feel frustrated and isolated, which can influence the quality

For each item, select the score you believe best reflects that person's efforts and contributions.

If the person:

- Always demonstrates the quality, you would give a score of 5.
- Frequently demonstrates the quality, you would give a score of 4.
- Sometimes demonstrates the quality, you would give a score of 3.
- Seldom demonstrates the quality, you would give a score of 2.
- Never demonstrates the quality, you would give a score of 1.

Your Name:	<input type="text"/>				
Team Member Reviewed:	<input type="text"/>				
1. Is willing to frequently share ideas and resources.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
2. Accepts responsibilities for tasks determined by the group.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
3. Respects differences of opinions and backgrounds.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
4. Is willing to negotiate and make compromises.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
5. Provides leadership and support by taking an active role in initiating ideas and actions.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
6. Respects decisions of others.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
7. Provides positive feedback of team members accomplishments.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
8. Is willing to work with others for the purpose of group success.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
9. Online communication is friendly in tone.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
10. Keeps in close contact with team members for the purpose of maintaining team cohesion and collaboration.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
11. Produces high quality work.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
12. Meets team deadlines.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
13. Comments (Please provide your teammate with positive and constructive feedback.):	<input type="text"/>				

**Figure 4. A Review Form for Evaluating the Contributions of Team Members.**

of future postings (“Why should I bother posting a good response if no one is going to read it?”) (Anderson, 2004).

In addition, because assessing contributions can be difficult and time consuming (Laurillard, 2002) and because of the sheer volume of postings possible in an asynchronous online course, some instructors default to requiring a minimum number of responses each week (Cameron, 2002; Salter, 2000). This strategy undermines the point of discussion, focusing learners’ and instructor’s attention on quantity instead of interactivity and quality. Rather than responding to every post, instructors need to employ strategies that adjust how discussions are facilitated and managed.

### Don’t Jump In

Allow learners to engage in the discussion initially without instructor intervention. This encourages them to express themselves without being influenced by the instructor’s viewpoints and reinforces that the instructor is not the only person in the learning community with some-

thing valuable to contribute. If response is delayed, it frees up the instructor’s time to focus on other aspects of the course. In addition, early instructor responses to student postings leads to many one-on-one discussions between the instructor and each of the students. Delayed response reduces workload by enabling the instructor to respond to groups of posts instead of individual posts (Ko & Rossen, 2004).

### To Summarize or Not to Summarize...

When learners are engaged in a discussion forum, the threads are deep (there are many responses to comments, involving three or more learners) and the posts reflect an understanding of previous posts and include additional information and evidence. Each learner may have multiple posts per discussion. Under these conditions, evaluating every post is time consuming. So if karma points are not appropriate or if instructor evaluation of learners’ contributions to the discussion is specifically needed but post-by-post assessment is not feasible, instructors can have learners write a summary of the week’s discussion that includes a general overview of the discussion, an excerpt of their most valuable contribution, and an explanation of why they consider it their best. These summaries become the unit of evaluation. They require learners to reflect on their own contributions, ideas, and work, and they synthesize the discussion to rein-

force the important “take-away” points (Anderson, 2004; Zhu, 1998). In addition, using summaries to close out a discussion before a new one starts avoids simultaneous discussions, which splinter the learning community’s attention.

### Depth Over Breadth

Instructors typically start an online discussion by posting questions or cues. Requiring learners to address several questions or cues in a single discussion reduces a potentially rich discussion to a simple set of replies. Limit the number of questions or cues to two or three that encourage interactivity and probe for more depth (e.g., Let’s build a job aid that helps designers incorporate the information from this reading into their own designs... Each team read a different article this week, and now it is time to build consensus... What position is the author advocating? How does the author’s argument resonate with your own experiences?) (Pena-Shaff, Martin, & Gay, 2001), and allow learners to select which question they respond to. This keeps the instructor and learners from having to track multiple dis-

EXCELLENT 8-10	COMPETENT 4-7	MINIMAL 0-3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides thoughtful, reflective, and complete discussion of the reading materials, adds supportive media and/or materials (specifically, the supporting learning resources web page).</li> <li>• Posts more than three thoughtful, discussion-provoking trigger questions/comments and probing or follow-up questions/comments to keep the discussion going.</li> <li>• Responds to participants' postings in ways that— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Advance the online discussion in a focused manner.</li> <li>o Reflect participants' thoughts and opinions.</li> <li>o Maintain the focus of online discussion and relate it to class activities and readings.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Discussion summary is complete.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides mostly thoughtful, reflective, and complete discussion of the reading materials, adds media and/or materials that somewhat support the issues (specifically with the supporting learning resource web page).</li> <li>• Posts two or three thoughtful, discussion-provoking trigger questions/comments and probing or follow-up questions/comments to keep the discussion going.</li> <li>• Responds to participants' postings in ways that— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Partially advance the online discussion in a focused manner.</li> <li>o Partially reflect participants' thoughts and opinions.</li> <li>o Partially maintain the focus of online discussion and relate it to class activities and readings.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Discussion summary is mostly complete.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not provide thoughtful, reflective, and complete discussion of the reading materials, adds limited to no media and/or materials that support the issues.</li> <li>• Does not post enough thoughtful, discussion-provoking trigger questions/comments to get the discussion going. Does not post enough probing or follow-up questions/comments to keep the discussion going.</li> <li>• Responds to participants' postings in ways that— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Do not advance the online discussion in a focused manner.</li> <li>o Do not reflect participants' thoughts and opinions.</li> <li>o Do not maintain the focus of online discussion and do not relate it to class activities and readings.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Discussion summary is incomplete.</li> </ul>

**Figure 5. Rubric for “Take Over the Reins” Online Facilitation Activity.**

ussions, allowing them to make better use of their instructional time.

### Turn Over the Reins

Have individuals or small groups of learners facilitate online discussions (Rourke & Anderson, 2002; Zhu, 1998). Besides the potential time savings for the instructor, this can be a great instructional strategy because it gives learners a chance to learn how to facilitate online discussions and activities, which is important because, for most of them, facilitating online meetings and work sessions is a critical emerging professional skill. An instructor can have the learners assess the quality of an individual's or small group's facilitation using a rubric like the one provided in Figure 5. This reduces instructor facilitation *and* assessment workload.

### Sharing the Responsibility

Sometimes learners need permission to act as the experts they are, so instructors need to set up systems and expectations that require learners to take on some initial responsibility for answering peers' questions, such as:

- Providing public forums at course and week/project levels and directing learners to post questions to these forums instead of emailing the instructor privately (unless a learner wishes to remain anonymous or have a personal discussion with the instructor). This way, one learner's question and the instructor or peer's response to

that question will be available to benefit the other learners (and will save the instructor from responding to the same questions repeatedly).

- Directing learners to ask questions in their small groups before asking the instructor. Instructors can further encourage this type of peer support by allowing each small group to post a limited number of questions to the instructor within a specific timeframe (e.g., groups can only post two questions to the instructor per week). This encourages the members of small groups to work together to answer as many of their questions as possible and to prioritize the questions they cannot answer on their own or through research. Besides reducing the instructor's workload, it helps learners be more intentional about their learning, learn to use a variety of resources besides the instructor, and negotiate and prioritize based on the learning needs of the group.
- Providing a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) forum. Instructors can tell learners that they may only post unique questions to the forum. This forces them to review all questions and answers before posting a new question (and they may find an answer to their question in the process).
- Giving karma points for good questions (see previous discussion on karma points). For example, David Wiley (2004) uses a unique approach in one of his online courses. Learners receive points for posting questions that further the learning community's understanding of various topics and reflect an honest curiosity and openness to push that understanding and existing biases.

These approaches involve a number of previously mentioned workload-reduction strategies and tactics. They spread the wealth by distributing the workload involved in responding to course participants' questions, helping learners develop their own questioning skills and acknowledging the expertise learners have to share, which can reduce feelings of isolation, promote social richness, and have a positive influence on self-efficacy.

### Connecting with the Community

Instructors can connect learners to resources outside the course, within the larger community of practice. For many domains there exist professional online communities with discussion forums, FAQs, and other helpful resources. Encouraging learners to access those professional communities helps instructors deal with learner questions while getting learners to use the resources professionals use in the workplace (Wilson et al., 2004).

### Connecting Synchronously

Teaching online courses of 30 or more learners can be overwhelming for an instructor, and the strategies for facilitating asynchronous online discussion forums shared above may not fully address this unique challenge. One way to reduce discussion facilitation workload is to use a synchronous communication tool such as chat to meet with small groups of learners each week. Weekly, synchronous meetings can be used to discuss readings, assess project status, ask and answer questions, and so forth. For example, if there are 30 learners in a course, there could be six groups of five learners. Instead of tracking learners asynchronously all week long, an instructor can meet with each group synchronously for one hour per week.

This is also an effective technique to encourage learners to reflect on their learning while collaborating with peers. Each small group must work together in advance of the one-hour meeting to prepare the questions they will ask, what they want to present, and so on. This requires them to negotiate and prioritize their interests and needs; they learn shared responsibility for the group's learning needs. They also must be reflective about their own learning goals and needs to determine those priorities. They learn to ask good questions as well as how to present their ideas and perspectives using online communication technologies. Finally, if a different group member is responsible for leading each meeting and making sure that the other group members have opportunities to contribute and participate, they all learn how to facilitate synchronous online meetings—an important workplace skill.

### Conclusion

The ideal workload-reduction solution does not simply transfer the workload from the instructor to the learners, but instead uses strategies that enhance the learning and overall

online course experience for everyone involved by (1) creating a sense of learning community in which learners learn from each other and from the instructor, (2) encouraging the sharing of multiple perspectives, (3) promoting high-quality work through collaboration and peer review, (4) preparing learners for teamwork in the workplace, and (5) increasing learner course completion through reduced isolation.

However, it is important to note that online teaching—and good teaching in general—takes a lot of time even when using these strategies. Along with being good time managers, guarding against the tendency to check online activity constantly, and striving for balance between the rewards and demands of busy personal and professional lives (Anderson, 2004), these strategies help to manage some of the obvious workload pitfalls while establishing instructor presence and social richness and creating an engaging learning and teaching experience. And maybe they can help every member of the online learning community, including the instructor, get some shuteye. 🌙

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