

Competitive Online Case Presentations

Rita J. Czaja

University of Wisconsin – Whitewater

Richard G. Cummings

University of Wisconsin - Whitewater

Abstract

Interaction among students does not occur as naturally in online classes as in face-to-face classes. However, interaction is important in helping students to feel engaged with a course. Online classes need structures where interaction can occur among students as well as between students and the instructor. This paper shows how competitive case presentations by groups can be used in an online graduate course to produce the engagement that results from more informal interaction in the classroom. Throughout the semester, teams of students present their solutions to cases online (two teams per case). The remaining students evaluate both teams using a survey instrument that allows for both quantitative and qualitative feedback. Course-management software summarizes the results and the presenting teams receive feedback from a large number of peers as well as the instructor. Results show that case presentations provide a vehicle through which students apply content knowledge, develop communication skills, and interact with peers. The interaction takes place in discussions as teams work on their presentations and through peer assessment of presentations.

Introduction

Interaction among students does not occur as naturally in online classes as in face-to-face classes. However, interaction is important in helping students to feel engaged with a course. Student engagement is an important issue on college campuses today with more than 1,300 colleges and universities using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) since 2000.¹ Online classes need structures where interaction can occur among students as well as between students and the instructor. Other researchers have described the use of discussions and group projects in various academic settings to provide opportunities for interaction (e.g., Cameron, Morgan and Williams 2009; Holmen 2008). Peer assessment is another pedagogical technique that inherently involves student-to-student interaction.

This paper describes the use of competitive case presentations by groups in an online accounting course. It shows how group work, competition, and peer assessment can produce the engagement that might naturally result from interaction in the classroom. This is the first article to describe the use of presentations in an online course.

Teams of students are scheduled to present their solutions to cases throughout the semester. By an assigned date, two teams present their solution to the same case online. The remaining students evaluate both teams using a survey

¹ <http://nsse.iub.edu/html/about.cfm>

instrument that allows for both quantitative and qualitative feedback. Course-management software summarizes the results and the presenting teams receive feedback from a large number of peers as well as the instructor.

The next section provides the theoretical foundation for the assignment described in this paper. Then the assignment and related course procedures are presented along with guidance on implementation. Finally, the results of using online case presentations are described and discussed.

Background

Some aspects of teaching online, such as the use of competition and peer assessment, present essentially the same issues as teaching face-to-face. Other aspects, such as the use of student presentations, are significantly affected by the technology and absence of face-to-face contact. As a result, instructors may be stimulated to re-think a learning objective or revise an assignment.

Competition

Competition adds incentive and excitement to politics and athletic events; it is also common in business. In the same manner, competition can spark interest and increase student desire to do well in academic activities (Good and Brophy, 1990; Kinzie, Hrade and Larsen, 1998; Tauer and Harackiewicz, 2004). There are national investment, marketing, and accounting competitions at the college level as well as spelling, geography, and problem-solving competitions for elementary and high school students. Competition stimulates people's needs for achievement and social approval, which often leads to effort to satisfy those needs. Competitions can thus motivate effort to learn material and to complete assignments.

However, competition can also lead to reduced effort by threatening students' sense of competence and self-esteem. This is particularly true of zero-sum competition, where there is only one winner. Researchers (e.g., Covington, 2000; Kinzie et al., 1998; and Vallerand, Gauvin, and Halliwell, 2001) advocate instructional activities that focus on learning rather than very competitive activities.

Several psychology-based theories suggest ways to structure competitive activities so that effort is increased. For example, cognitive evaluation theory points to the value of competitors being evenly matched so they all have a reasonable chance of success (Covington, 1999, 2000). Researchers studying social interdependence theory (e.g., Johnson and Johnson, 2005; Stanne, Johnson, and Johnson, 1999; Tauer and Harackiewicz, 2004) find that cooperation and competition result in similar performance when the following conditions are met: 1) there is not a heavy emphasis on winning, 2) participants are evenly matched, and 3) rules are clear. The assignment described in this paper satisfies these conditions and thus offers a potential way to use competition to increase student motivation.

Peer assessment

Peer assessment obviously increases students' interaction with each other and can also increase students' engagement with course material. Rust et al. (2003) find significant improvement in student performance both shortly after the peer assessment experience and one year later. It is one of the few studies to measure the actual change in performance (rather than students' perception of change) after students experienced peer assessment. Omelicheva (2005) finds that peer assessment develops students' ability to apply assessment criteria to their own work. Thus, the experience of applying assessment criteria may be the mechanism by which students are able to improve their own performance in the future.

Peer assessment also helps to avoid the problem of students "tuning out" during presentations by their peers. When a student is giving a presentation, the rest of the class may pay less attention than when the instructor is presenting material. Students who are extrinsically motivated, for example, may reason that the material will not be on a test and accordingly may pay little attention to the material. In a study of various graduate classes, Sivan (2000) finds evidence that requiring students to assess their peers' presentations provides a clear reason for actively engaging the material.

The absence of personal contact in online classes could affect students' comfort level with peer assessment. However, McConnell (2002, p. 80) reports that graduate students did not find collaborative assessment too hard to do online in spite of the "narrowness of the communication medium and all the missing social cues." Making suggestions for improvement might actually be easier when feedback is given anonymously than in face-to-face situations. Students in both online and face-to-face classes have said they felt uncomfortable with their lack of experience in assessment (Prins, Sluijsmans, Kirshner and Strijbos 2005; Sivan 2000). Providing assessment criteria increases students' comfort level in assessing peers (Sivan 2000). Peer assessment is a key component of the assignment described in this paper.

Presentations

Student presentations can satisfy two primary objectives. First, having to explain material forces presenters to clarify their thoughts and understanding of the subject. Second, presenting their work gives students practice in honing their communication skills. In addition, students like being able to see other students' work (Bloxham and West 2004). Knowing that their work will be seen by peers can also increase students' motivation.

However, oral presentations by students are not readily accomplished in online education. While PowerPoint can record narrations, there are drawbacks to its use. The resulting files will generally be too large to transmit in a reasonable time frame, especially for students with dial-up internet connections. Technical support will be needed to compress the files. Other software, such as Camtasia, provides features not found in PowerPoint, but many students may not be familiar with those products. Not all students will have a microphone. Also, dividing the presentation among group members in this environment is not easily accomplished without technical support.

One alternative is to simply require written reports that would be shared with the class. There is, however, an emerging form of communication that bridges the space between oral presentations and written reports. Speakers at events often make their PowerPoint slides available to people who were not able to attend. Companies that make webcast presentations to employees or outsiders may provide the PowerPoint slides to people who could not view the live webcast.

Designing presentations that are effective both with and without narration requires thoughtful adaptation. "Best practice" for an oral presentation is to have limited information on PowerPoint slides, so that the speaker adds to what the audience can read. Slides with a lot of text are also visually unattractive and tedious to read. However, if other people will view the slides later, providing more complete information on the slides is desirable. The challenge is to strike the right balance between too little and too much information. Presentations can thus be a worthwhile learning activity in online courses.

This study makes three contributions to the accounting education literature. First, it adds to the online education literature by showing how presentations can be used in an online course. Second, while competition and cooperation have been studied extensively², intergroup competition has received relatively little attention outside of sports. This study documents the results of an intergroup competition in an academic setting. Third, this study provides a model for building interaction into quantitative online courses such as accounting.

Learning Environment

Accounting Foundations is a graduate-level course that provides an introduction to financial accounting for students in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program at a regional mid-western university. This MBA program is offered online as well as on-site in three locations. Students taking the Accounting Foundations course typically do not have undergraduate degrees in business. The course is offered online once a year with a typical enrollment of

² A search on the words 'education' and 'cooperation or competition' in the business, education, and psychology databases of Academic Search Complete yielded over 1,700 full-text, peer-reviewed articles (limited to human subjects).

40 to 50 students. Data were collected for three semesters (fall 2006, fall 2007, and fall 2008) by the same full-time, tenure-track accounting professor.

This section describes the case assignment and related course procedures and provides guidance on implementation of competitive case presentations with peer assessment³.

Assignment Description

The instructor assigns students to eight teams of five to six students using their last name in alphabetical order. Therefore the first eight students will be the first members of each team. About one third of the way through the course, short cases from the textbook⁴ are assigned to the teams (two teams per case and two cases per team). (See Exhibit 1 for the instructions given to the class.) Teams are asked to present a solution that effectively addresses the issues raised in each of their assigned cases. Students are reminded that their team will be competing against another team.

Only two teams present each week. The other teams (the non-competing teams) and the instructor provide feedback to members of the presenting teams through an online survey. Students have an opportunity to use knowledge gained from their own and peers' case presentations when they prepare their second case later in the semester.

Procedure

The course-management system (Desire2Learn⁵) provides several features that facilitate the administration of this assignment. Online classes require use of the course-management system and most also require knowledge of basic functions in Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. The steps using technology for this project are listed below.

1. The project handout (see Exhibit 1) is found online in the course-management system. This provides students instructions for the project as well as due dates for case presentations and peer evaluations.
2. Students are assigned to teams the first day of class. They can find their team number in the online class list.
3. As they prepare their project, students use a discussion area in the course-management system to talk about their project and to share files. Access to a team's discussion area is restricted to the team members (and the instructor). E-mail is also available for this purpose although the discussion area offers at one glance "one-stop shopping" of what everyone has contributed to the case. E-mail would require the review of multiple e-mails.
4. By the due date students submit a file containing their final team solution to a drop-box area in the course-management system.
5. The instructor copies the student files to the content area for all students to review.
6. Students who were not a member of the competing teams have a week to review the case and proceed to a survey section of the course-management system to complete a survey (see Exhibit 2) providing feedback on the case presentation. The last two paragraphs of Exhibit 1 describe the requirements and expectations for peer assessment of the case presentations.

³ In an online course, all materials are typically available to students on the first day of the term. That makes it essential to think carefully about the details of assignments and course procedures in advance.

⁴ The textbook was *Financial Accounting: Tools for Business Decision Making* by Kimmel, Weygandt, & Kieso (2004), Wiley & Sons.

⁵ <http://www.desire2learn.com/>

7. The course-management system produces a summary report of the peer-assessment survey (see Exhibit 3) that includes the answers to the open-ended questions. The instructor uses a grading rubric (see Exhibit 4) to provide feedback and grades to the competing teams. The grading rubric and survey report is posted back to the team's drop-box area (usually within 24 hours after the survey is due).

Logistics

As noted above, each week some students submit presentations and most students submit feedback surveys. In contrast, a more typical assignment structure has all students submitting the same assignment on the same due date. To minimize confusion, it is essential to have a clear schedule of due dates. Students are provided with one matrix that shows the case numbers and due dates for each team. A second matrix shows the teams whose members must submit peer-assessment surveys and the due dates. (These matrices are shown in Exhibit 1.)

Cases are assigned such that each team competes against a different team for the second case they are assigned. Also, each team has at least two weeks between presentations.

Assessment and Feedback

The course-management system produces a report for each team that shows the distribution of responses to the five assessment items in Question 1. The report provides the number and percentage of each response as well as a bar graph of that data (see Exhibit 3). The report also includes all responses to the open-ended questions asking for suggestions for improvement and a discussion of which of the two teams did a better job of presenting the case and solution.

A grading rubric (see Exhibit 4) reminds students of the assessment criteria, shows the number of points available and received for each criterion, and explains the reasons for the scores. Assessment criteria can be linked to the peer survey questions. The point grade is determined by the instructor, but peer survey information is also used by the instructor to support the points assigned. Each team sees the survey reports for both teams but only their own team score on the grading rubric. The two case presentations represent 8-9% of the grade for the course.

Participation Management

To motivate students to complete the peer surveys, students receive points for providing feedback to the presenting teams. These points usually represent 11-13% of the grade for the course.

Typically, everyone on a team receives the team score for the presentation. However, with group projects there is the potential for a "free-rider" problem. To discourage students from shirking their fair share of the work load, the instructor reserves the right to administer a team participation survey. The instructor may decrease an individual's presentation score based on the results of the participation survey, i.e., the free rider would not receive the team score. This policy is included in the assignment instructions (see Exhibit 1). The instructor identifies possible cases of shirking by asking team members, when the team grade is sent out, if everyone participated and should receive the team score. Typically, the participation survey is used once or twice each semester.

Results

Over the three semesters covered in this report, most teams (83%) used the private discussion areas that had been established in the course-management system. Excluding four teams with fewer than 10 postings, the range of postings was 22-249, the mean was 106, and the median was 92. Thus, based on this metric, the assignment resulted in substantial student-to-student interaction. On average, 76% of the students who were not presenting a case submitted peer-assessment surveys. Awarding credit for this class activity appears successful in motivating students' participation.

The peer-assessment ratings were converted to numeric scores on a one-to-five scale with "strongly disagree" coded as 1. The average score across all presentations was 4.2 out of 5.0 (84%), indicating that peers "agreed" the teams met the assessment criteria. On average, teams scored highest on Item #2 ("The presenters did a good job connecting the topic and case to ideas we have learned in accounting"), which had a mean of 4.3. The lowest mean (3.9) was

observed on Item #4 (“The presenters made the case ‘come alive’ by providing a presentation that was pleasing to the eye and compelling to see.”) Extensive communication via the discussion area and reasonably high assessment scores are consistent with the conclusion that students worked hard on the case presentations and that they were actively engaging the material.

One concern about peer assessment is that students know less about the subject matter and assessment than instructors. Consequently, their assessments may not be valid measures of performance. In this study, the instructor and students agreed on which team performed better in 18 out of 24 (75%) of the competitions. The correlation between the average peer assessment score and the instructor’s point grade was 61%. These results are consistent with prior research, which finds a high correlation between instructor and peer assessments (see literature review by Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; also Topping, 1998 in Sahin, 2008).

Other researchers have found that students tend to focus on ‘visible’ aspects (e.g., style) rather than content (Bloxham & West, 2004; Rust et al., 2003; Sivan, 2000). That result was observed in the present study as well. Many comments from student peers addressed issues such as spelling and grammar errors, use of graphics and animation, too few or too many different fonts or font sizes, and too many words on a slide. For example, students wrote:

- “The paper was full of typos in the form of spelling, punctuation, grammar and spacing errors.”
- “Clip art for the sake of clipart is a distraction.”
- “Maintain consistent font size/style throughout the presentation.”
- “Maybe dress up the power point a little bit with background colors and creative fonts.”
- “Maybe use bullets instead of paragraphs.”

However, there were also ample comments on higher-order communication skills such as organization and clarity of explanations:

- “The biggest issue I had with the presentation was it’s [sic] lack of flow. To me it seemed less like the slides were individually ‘connecting the dots’ and more like they were facts strewn together.”
- “. . . team 5 did a great job breaking down the calculations involved with the project.”
- “. . . I think that especially through the use of tables and charts, they were able to provide us with an easy to follow answer.”

Three presentations used Word or Excel and received an average score of 3.2 on Item 4 (visual appeal) as compared to an average of 4.0 for presentations using PowerPoint. However, the overall scores averaged 4.0 for the Word/Excel presentations as compared to 4.2 for the PowerPoint presentations. This suggests that peers can look past the visual aspects and separately assess content and clarity.

The following examples are from students who gave more weight to content:

- “My only suggestion would have been to present this case in a PP format. However, in my opinion, your presentation was thorough and left nothing to be desired. As such format becomes irrelevant.”
- “As much as it pains me to pick the group that used word over power point [sic] I think I’m going to have to side with team 8.”

These examples are from students who gave more weight to visual appeal:

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- “Team 4 far surpassed Team 8 by presenting their case with a beautiful PowerPoint presentation.”
- “Team 1 due to their easy to read powerpoint [sic]. Team 5’s case was complete but not visually appealing.”

There were relatively few comments about the quality of solutions and thoroughness of analysis. Examples of this more substantive type of feedback follow.

- “Pointing out that having a high level of inventory on hand reduces cash was an excellent point.”
- “I liked how this team thought critically about the impact of Maggie’s and Joe’s decisions.”

There was one case for which both teams had errors in their calculations. Only 19% of the students providing feedback commented on the errors.

Discussion

The assignment described above creates the conditions identified in social psychology research for effective competition. First, the case presentations carry enough weight to stimulate serious effort without putting too much emphasis on “winning.” Second, using groups with randomly assigned members provides more balanced ability levels than would be likely if students self-selected into groups. With balanced ability levels, a close contest is more likely, which means students who lose in the first competition are less likely to be discouraged. Third, the assignment and instructor’s expectations are explained in detail in the instructions to the assignment and in the peer-assessment survey.

Social interdependence theory predicts that team members will feel a sense of responsibility to the team because the individual’s work affects other people (see Johnson & Johnson, 2005 for a review of this literature). Creating a sense of group identity might appear difficult in an online course, where students do not have the same opportunities for interaction as in a face-to-face class. However, social psychology experiments show that merely telling people that they belong to a group is sufficient for them to identify with the group (Vaughan, Tajfel & Williams, 1981). This is known as the Minimal Group Paradigm. Amichai-Hamburger (2005) demonstrates that this result, originally obtained in face-to-face settings, also occurs in the online environment.

Giving students points for submitting the peer-assessment survey is effective in achieving a high rate of peer-assessment participation. Many of the comments in the surveys address spelling, formatting, graphics, and organization rather than subject matter content. While most of the case solutions presented were correct, most students did not comment on errors when they did exist. Some students may have made the same errors or may have doubted their answers after seeing a different answer presented. Another possible explanation is that students who are not presenting do not work these cases on their own. Consequently, they do not detect errors by the presenters. This would also lead to a disproportionate number of comments on ‘soft’ aspects of the presentation.

This paper shows how student presentations can be used in an online course. Oral presentations pose technical difficulties, but written reports are not the only alternative form of assignment. While PowerPoint is not intended to replace reports, it is being used in business and academia to share information from presentations with wider audiences. The assignment described here requires students to think carefully about the best way to present information to an audience that will receive the information in a different time and place. Thinking about the intended audience is a prerequisite for good communication in every medium.

Case presentations provide the vehicle through which students apply content knowledge, develop communication skills, and interact with peers. The interaction takes place in discussions as teams work on their presentations and through peer assessment of presentations. This structured interaction is used along with competition to produce the engagement that might result from more informal interactions in a face-to-face class.

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Exhibit 1
Instructions to Students

Team Case Projects (50 points)
Peer Case Feedback (80 points)

Here is how the Team Case Projects and Peer Case Feedback will work:

- Each team (see class list tab for your team number) will prepare two cases. Each individual student will complete twelve one-page, online surveys (called peer case feedback) on other team's case presentation.
- Below are two schedules. The first one is for the due dates of your team case presentation. The second one is for the due dates of your individual peer case feedback. You will complete two online surveys for each of your peer case feedback due dates since two teams compete for each case. Competing team members will not complete surveys on each other's case.
- Submit your case to the appropriate location under the drop-box tab by your case due date. You can browse and attach your file here.
- Peer Case Feedback surveys can be found under the survey tab. Your comments will be anonymous to the case presenter.
- See the requirements below for the case and evaluations before you start!

Case Due Dates: (All Case Numbers have a BYP prefix in your textbook!)

Teams:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Due Date:								
October 20	5-7				5-7			
October 27		6-8				6-8		
November 3			7-8				7-8	
November 10				8-8				8-8
November 17	9-8						9-8	
November 24		10-9						10-9
December 1			11-8		11-8			
December 8				13-9		13-9		

Exhibit 1 (continued)
Instructions to Students

Peer Case Feedback Due Dates:

Due Date	Students from Teams	2 Surveys on Case
October 27	2,3,4,6,7,8	5-7
November 3	1,3,4,5,7,8	6-8
November 10	1,2,4,5,6,8	7-8
November 17	1,2,3,5,6,7	8-8
November 24	2,3,4,5,6,8	9-8
December 1	1,3,4,5,6,7	10-9
December 8	1,2,4,6,7,8	11-8
December 15	1,2,3,5,7,8	13-9

For example: By October 20, Teams 1 and 5 will turn in BYP 5-7 to the drop box. By October 27, students from teams 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 will look in Module 12 in the content area to see the two cases turned in the previous week. They will then individually complete the online surveys (click survey tab) for each of the two cases turned in the previous week.

Team Case Project Requirements: The general requirement of the cases that you present is that your solution effectively addresses the issues raised in your specific case. Questions on the survey will ask your peers and instructor to evaluate your presentation based on the depth and effectiveness of the solution, the visual appeal, and ease of understanding the case and solution from the presentation. I want you to compete against the other team to motivate you to do your best and bring out your best skills in this process. I believe we can assume that the audience can view Microsoft, Word, Excel, and PowerPoint.

Peer Case Feedback Requirements: The general requirement for the peer case feedback requirements is that you add value to the case. You should demonstrate in the narrative questions that you understand the case and the solution. You should also provide constructive feedback to the teams. Remember: your comments will be anonymous to the team (but not to the instructor).

Peer Review of Case Participation: I think graduate students who have professional responsibilities know how to interact in a group environment and share the work of each case to every team member's satisfaction. We all have to do that no matter what committee or team in which we participate. It is imperative that you communicate with your team members. It is my desire that everyone on the team receive the same grade for the case. When there is a team problem, I reserve the right to administer a team participation survey to the team members. This could greatly reduce the points of negligent team members. Let's hope we don't have to go there.

Exhibit 3 Peer Survey Report

Sample of report for categorical-response questions:

Question 1

Please evaluate this team's presentation using the five dimensions identified below:

The Case Problem and Solution was easy to understand from the presentation.



Exhibit 4
Grading Rubric

The Team Case and Evaluation page mentioned that your case would be evaluated by your peers and instructor in three categories. Those categories include the depth and effectiveness of the solution, visual appeal, and ease of understanding the case and solution from the presentation. I have read and attached your peer comments. They are very helpful in providing feedback on how your presentation was received. Note that you were asked to compete against the other team in your case presentation in the hopes of competition bringing out the best work. Accordingly, it seems only fair that the competing teams should know all the reasons why each team received the scores they did. This brings a synergistic effect of learning from both sides of the competition.

Assessment Criteria	Comments and Explanation	Points Earned
Depth and Effectiveness of Solution (15 points)		
Visual Appeal (5 points)		
Ease of Understanding (5 points)		
Total Points		