

Teaching Tactics

Describe a successful classroom teaching tactic that could be replicated by other instructors.

Using Word Clouds for Reflection and Discussion in an Online Class

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The context: This strategy was originally used in the online graduate class, “The Spiritual Development of College Students” (HIED 632) in the Masters of Higher Education program at a small, liberal arts college. While currently part of the curriculum in this course, favorable feedback has expanded the use of this strategy to the Masters of Curriculum and Instruction, Graduate Superintendent’s Certificate program, and Masters of Communication programs. Courses are comprised of twelve to twenty graduate students in an online learning environment.

The pedagogical purpose: To promote reflection and synthesis on course content. The strategy stimulates discussion that engages students in reflection, discussion, and content synthesis.

Description of the strategy: Students create a word cloud (compilation of key words, terms, and so forth) that visually synthesizes and displays their perception of key course content. This assignment uses Wordle, a free online word cloud generator (www.wordle.net), but it can also be accomplished using PowerPoint, word art, or in face-to-face situations, a dry erase board and markers, or such. At the mid-point of the semester, students select key terms, phrases, quotes, authors, Bible passages, which are essential to creating an accurate picture of the role of spiritual disciplines and practices in the spiritual development of a college student (the assignment can be tailored to most any course). These are entered in the word cloud space using the Wordle program (or on paper). The easy-to-use online program allows them to use colors, font size, and highlights, to create emphasis and visual effects. Students then copy and paste their Wordle into a class discussion which allows everyone to view and post comments. In a face-to-face environment, students hang completed word clouds on the walls and walk around examining their classmates’ work, posting comments with sticky notes.

Why it is effective: This exercise is fun, visually appealing, and incorporates various learning styles. Wordles involve a variety of learning skills which increases participation and potential for deeper learning. It incorporates the empowering influence of Web 2.0 technologies and skills enabling students to create content and engage in participatory learning. Students engage in critical reflection of their own work and work of their classmates by giving and receiving feedback that leads to further insights. Students participate in higher order thinking – reflection, organization, synthesis, and critique. Teachers can examine students’ grasp of course concepts and adjust the learning experience to accommodate any deficits in students understanding of course learning outcomes.

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