

# **(MY) THREE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE ONLINE PEDAGOGY**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

As the recipient of the 2003 Sloan-C award for Excellence in Online Teaching, I have been invited to share some of my thoughts regarding effective online pedagogy. I am nothing if not a teacher, and as such, I am honored—both by the recognition that accompanies this wonderful award, and by the opportunity to share my thoughts about asynchronous teaching and learning with my colleagues.

This may seem a strange way to begin, but I want to admit that my ever-emerging philosophy of education increasingly diminishes the role of “the teacher” in the teaching/learning equation. It took over 30 years of college teaching experience for me to realize that the learner is, for the most part, in charge of what gets learned. Implementing this point of view online has, for me, blurred, somewhat, the distinction between effective **teaching** and pedagogically sound **instructional design**. If I create an environment in which a majority of students gladly learn that which they and I deem relevant and salient, then have I succeeded as a teacher or as a designer?—and does it matter?

I hope some of the ideas that follow are helpful to others. I have liberally interspersed snippets from several of my current online courses throughout this essay. Because screen shots can be hard to read, I have also provided links to the actual courses whenever possible. When no link is available, it’s because the course is password protected. Should you find any of the words and/or strategies useful, feel free to copy or adapt them for your own use.

## **II. APPLIED ONLINE PEDAGOGY**

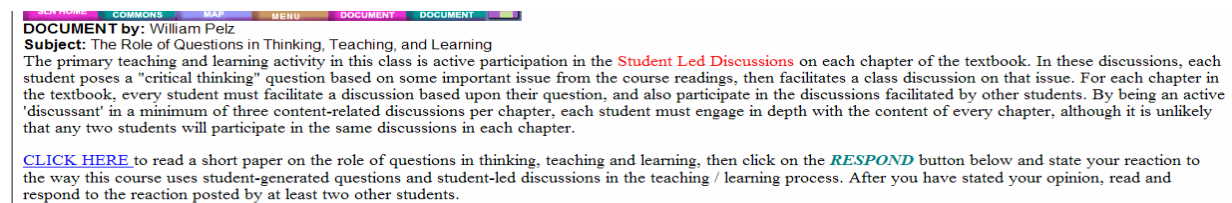
### **A. Principle #1: Let the students do (most of) the work.**

I took several education courses at SUNY Albany after I began my teaching career at Herkimer County Community College, courses which helped me figure out what it was that I did in the classroom. In one such course I was taught that student ‘time-on-task’ could account for at least some of the variance observed in much method-comparison research. Boiled down, this means that, regardless of what else is going on, the more ‘quality’ time students spend engaged in content, the more of that content they learn. This is reasonable. Unfortunately, I was never very successful in putting that bit of insight into practice in the classroom—it ran counter to my “I talk—you listen” style. I slowly came to realize, however, that listening to an enthusiastic and charismatic lecturer such as myself (?) isn’t quite the ‘quality’ time on task that I had convinced myself it was. One of my education professors put it this way: “A lecture is the best way to get information from the professor’s notebook into the student’s notebook without passing through either brain.” My transition from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side” has been gradual but rather complete. Here are a few of the strategies I use for putting the students in charge of their own learning.

**1. Student Led Discussions:** Student led discussions are a major learning activity in all of my ‘reading’ courses: Introductory Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Social Psychology and Abnormal Psychology. To a somewhat lesser extent, I also use student led discussions in my ‘skill’ courses: Freshman Seminar, Statistics for the Social Sciences, and Experimental Psychology.

Introducing the concept of the student led discussion to students, many of whom are used to listening to classroom discussions, or lurking in online discussions, takes place in a sequence of ungraded “Icebreaker Activities”.

**Icebreaker Activity 1.** Introduce the idea that ‘questions are a learning tool’. I refer students to a website which they are to read and then discuss among themselves.




**DOCUMENT by:** William Pelz  
**Subject:** The Role of Questions in Thinking, Teaching, and Learning  
The primary teaching and learning activity in this class is active participation in the **Student Led Discussions** on each chapter of the textbook. In these discussions, each student poses a “critical thinking” question based on some important issue from the course readings, then facilitates a class discussion on that issue. For each chapter in the textbook, every student must facilitate a discussion based upon their question, and also participate in the discussions facilitated by other students. By being an active ‘discussant’ in a minimum of three content-related discussions per chapter, each student must engage in depth with the content of every chapter, although it is unlikely that any two students will participate in the same discussions in each chapter.

[CLICK HERE](#) to read a short paper on the role of questions in thinking, teaching and learning, then click on the **RESPOND** button below and state your reaction to the way this course uses student-generated questions and student-led discussions in the teaching / learning process. After you have stated your opinion, read and respond to the reaction posted by at least two other students.

[CLICK HERE](#)

**Icebreaker Activity 2.** Introduce the idea of students as discussion facilitators.



**DOCUMENT by:** William Pelz  
**Subject:** Facilitating an Online Discussion  
In most of the modules, each student must facilitate several discussions: a website discussion and two or more chapter discussions. To prepare for this, I want you to read the information contained in the website I have linked to below, and then, using GOOGLE or the web search engine of your choice, find a website that teaches something relevant about how to facilitate a discussion. Create a working link to the website, and give a brief overview of the information.

Read and respond to a few of the submissions, and reply to each student who responds to your post.

1. Start by visiting this site: <http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/faqs/presenting/facilitateddiscussion.html>
2. Submit a website you locate.
3. Respond to a few websites posted by other students.

When you are ready to submit your website, click on the **RESPOND** button below.

[CLICK HERE](#)

Many of the professors I talk with are skeptical of putting students in charge of covering the content of the course. I, too, was initially skeptical. I have been pleasantly surprised at how well and how rapidly my students have learned how to facilitate discussions. They quickly realize that it is in their best interest to select important and multidimensional issues to discuss. They become quite adroit at asking thought-provoking questions which can not be answered by looking some facts up in the book.

**Icebreaker Activity 3.** Give detailed instructions to get the student led discussions off on the right foot.

SLN HOME COMMONS MAP MENU DOCUMENT DOCUMENT

**DOCUMENT by:** William Pelz  
**Subject:** Chapter 1

Write a discussion question from this chapter of the textbook. Read the questions already posted, and do not repeat a question asked by another student. Your question should relate directly to an issue discussed in the text, and should require a thoughtful response. Don't ask a question which can be answered by looking the answer up. Attitude, opinion, and application questions usually get thoughtful responses.

Participation in a student led discussion consists of the following 4 steps:

1. Post your original question. This must be done within the first two days the module is active. This will be your thread - you will be the discussion leader. Your job is to facilitate this discussion and get as much information from the other participants as you can that relates to the question you have asked.
2. Read the questions posted by the other students, and respond to **at least three** of them. Choose the threads you think will be the most interesting and beneficial to you. You will be a participant in these threads.
3. Respond to every student who responds to you. Do this in your own thread as well as the other threads you are participating in.
4. Continue participating in the threads until the module is over.

Note: If other students are not selecting your thread to participate in, perhaps it is because your question is too complex, confusing, or uninteresting. In this case, submit another question.

**When you are ready to post your question, click on the Respond graphic link below.**

[CLICK HERE](#)

What can you expect to achieve from the student led discussions? That is a reasonable question, and the answer may surprise you. My students are freshmen or sophomores at an open door community college. They quickly learn to ask thought-provoking questions which address the salient issues presented in the textbook. The ensuing discussions are usually both focused and far-reaching, depending upon my guidance and feedback. I encourage you to judge for yourself the quality of discourse that occurs by browsing through the SUNY Learning Network's course for observation. The link to this course is on the SLN Homepage at <http://sln.suny.edu>. (Most of the strategies I will be presenting are present in this course.)

**2. Students Find and Discuss Web Resources:** This is a recurring assignment. In each module, students locate a website which deals with content relevant to the chapters currently being discussed. They write a brief (400+ words) overview/review of the website, and then facilitate a discussion on it.

SLN HOME COMMONS MAP MENU DOCUMENT DOCUMENT

**DOCUMENT by:** William Pelz  
**Subject:** Website Discussion - Module 2

1. Use one of the Web search engines, such as [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), to find a *good* website which addresses an issue in this module.
2. Summarize/analyze the website content - minimum length 400 words.
3. Provide a **Web Site Name** and the **Web Site Address** in the appropriate fields at the bottom of the page. **The link you create must function for credit to be given.**
4. When other students respond to your posting, reply to them.
5. Read the summary/analyses submitted by other students, and comment as appropriate.

Your grade on this activity is based on 5 criteria:

1. The quality of the website you find
2. The quality of your summary/analysis
3. The quality of your replies to students who respond to your summary
4. The quality of your responses to other students summary/analyses
5. The quantity of posts to this discussion

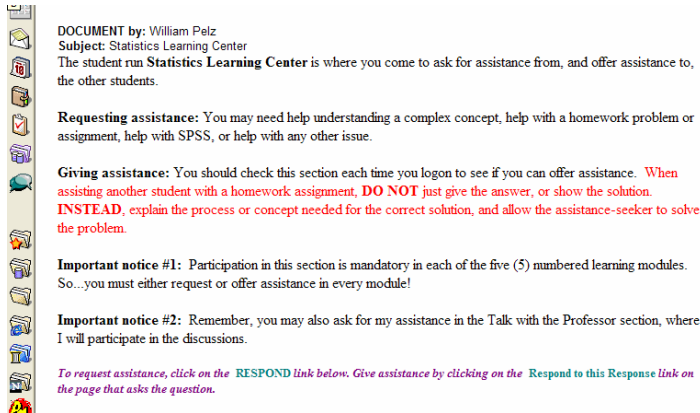
Refer to "How You Will Be Evaluated - Parts 1 and 2" in the Course Information area for details.

**To post your website summary and initiate your discussion thread, click on Respond below. Use a brief description of the web site topic as the Subject field.**

[CLICK HERE](#)

This activity provides students practice with the skills they need to locate discipline appropriate web resources, and gives them some practice in evaluating the authenticity of such sites. Additionally, students are exposed to additional and often newer information than that presented in their textbook.

**3. Students Help Each Other Learn (Peer Assistance):** This strategy works well in courses which require students to solve problems or complete lab activities, such as math courses, science courses, etc. The directions below are from my Statistics for the Social Sciences course.



DOCUMENT by: William Pelz  
Subject: Statistics Learning Center  
The student run **Statistics Learning Center** is where you come to ask for assistance from, and offer assistance to, the other students.

**Requesting assistance:** You may need help understanding a complex concept, help with a homework problem or assignment, help with SPSS, or help with any other issue.

**Giving assistance:** You should check this section each time you logon to see if you can offer assistance. **When assisting another student with a homework assignment, DO NOT just give the answer, or show the solution. INSTEAD, explain the process or concept needed for the correct solution, and allow the assistance-seeker to solve the problem.**

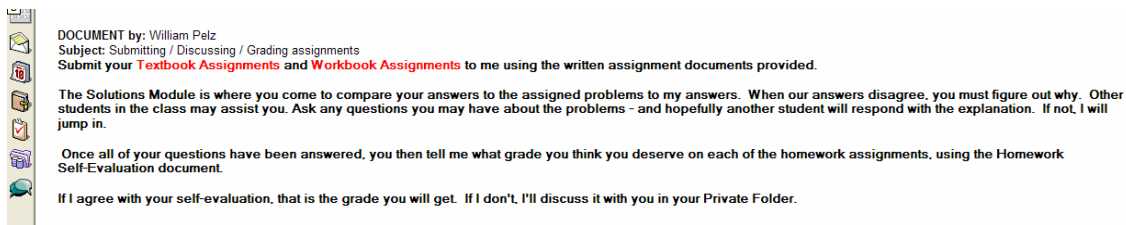
**Important notice #1:** Participation in this section is mandatory in each of the five (5) numbered learning modules. So...you must either request or offer assistance in every module!

**Important notice #2:** Remember, you may also ask for my assistance in the Talk with the Professor section, where I will participate in the discussions.

*To request assistance, click on the [RESPOND](#) link below. Give assistance by clicking on the [Respond to this Response](#) link on the page that asks the question.*

(No link available)

**4. Students Grade Their Own Homework Assignments:** This strategy works well in courses where homework problems are assigned. Students submit their solutions to the professor, and then check their answers against the key. They discuss with one another the errors they made, then suggest their grade for the assignment to the professor. Here are the instructions I post for my Statistics course:



DOCUMENT by: William Pelz  
Subject: Submitting / Discussing / Grading assignments  
**Submit your Textbook Assignments and Workbook Assignments to me using the written assignment documents provided.**

The **Solutions Module** is where you come to compare your answers to the assigned problems to my answers. When our answers disagree, you must figure out why. Other students in the class may assist you. Ask any questions you may have about the problems - and hopefully another student will respond with the explanation. If not, I will jump in.

**Once all of your questions have been answered, you then tell me what grade you think you deserve on each of the homework assignments, using the Homework Self-Evaluation document.**

If I agree with your self-evaluation, that is the grade you will get. If I don't, I'll discuss it with you in your Private Folder.

(No link available)

**5. Case Study Analysis:** I find this strategy very effective in my Abnormal Psychology course. Students are given fairly complex cases to discuss. Following the discussion phase, each student must formulate a diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment program. They are allowed to collaborate on their reports, but each student receives an individual grade.

SUN HOME STUDENT COMMONS COURSE MAP MODULE MENU PREVIOUS DOCUMENT NEXT DOCUMENT ?

**DOCUMENT by:** William Pelz  
**Subject:** Case Study Instructions  
 Two steps are required for each case study assignment:

1. Complete the [Part 1: Discussion](#) of the case study with the other members of your group.
2. One or two days before the due date, submit the [Part 2: Report](#) assignment. This assignment will be graded as Pass (A) / Fail (F)

This case study will require you to read ahead in the text, and also to pull in information from other sources. By the final day of this module, you will submit your diagnosis and treatment plan. Each student must submit a separate assignment, but you may work together and submit identical answers if you want to. However, if you disagree with others in your group, you may submit an entirely different answer. I will grade your assignment as Pass (A) or Fail (F). To earn a Pass, your diagnosis must address each of the axes, and you must support your answers either with facts, or with conclusions you have derived from the case. Your treatment plan must be as specific as you can make it, and include recommendations suggested by each of the appropriate therapeutic modalities. Conclude your analysis of the case by suggesting the client's prognosis. **Always justify your diagnosis, treatment plan, and prognosis to the best of your ability.**

**There are three separate answers required for each case study:**

- a specific diagnosis using all of the appropriate axes of DSM-IV.
- a treatment plan - be specific!
- an estimate the client's prognosis - with justification.

**Tips for Making A More Accurate Diagnosis**

- These cases represent complex human beings. You need to review the entire case before you begin formulating your diagnosis(es).
- Be sure to use all of the information that is available. Your goal should be to form a diagnosis and be able to cite facts that support it.
- Pay attention to all of the facts and symptoms. It is important to acknowledge symptoms that are both consistent and inconsistent with your diagnosis.
- Finally, be aware that clients do not always tell the truth. You may need to be skeptical of some of their answers and try to infer underlying meanings.

(No link available)

The common thread in each of these learning activities is that the students do most of the work. The role of the professor is limited to providing the necessary structure and directions, supportive and corrective feedback, and evaluation of final product.

In the case of the student led discussions, evaluation is no small matter! I grade each discussion response using a grading scale and rubric well-known to the students. (I introduce and discuss this rubric later.) Students receive feedback from me within 24 hours of submitting their discussion posts. This requires me to logon and grade the new discussion posts every day. This may sound overwhelming—it is not. Grading student posts in a discussion-heavy online course with 25 students requires about 30–45 minutes per day. It does not take me any longer to manage a full load of online courses than it would take me to manage the same load in the traditional classroom environment.

## **B. Principle #2: Interactivity is the heart and soul of effective asynchronous learning.**


I believe that interactivity is what differentiates an effective online course from a high-tech correspondence course. Research conducted by the SUNY Learning Network since its inception in 1995 has consistently identified quantity and quality of student-student and student-professor interaction as strong positive correlates with student and faculty satisfaction. Face-to-face interactivity is good, threaded asynchronous interactivity is great! In a traditional classroom, interaction requires listening and talking, online interactivity requires reading and writing. In my experience and opinion, reading and writing are superior to listening and talking for learning. Do I have any empirical evidence to support this belief? No, but I think it's true! I know from the feedback I get from my online students that they like threaded discussions of content, and they tell me that they are learning a lot from them. I get similar reports fairly often from acquaintances who teach online.

Interaction is not just discussion. Students can be required to interact with one another, with the professor, with the text, with the Internet, with the entire class, in small groups or teams, one-on-one with a partner, etc. In addition to discussing the course content, students can interact regarding assignments, problems to solve, case studies, lab activities, etc. Any course can be designed with required interactivity. Here are a

few examples from my courses.

**1. Collaborative Research Paper:** Students collaborate to develop topics, organize their paper, and collect web resources. The completed paper is submitted for class discussion.

**Step 1:** Assign the term paper at the beginning of the semester.



**DOCUMENT** by: William Pelz  
**Subject:** Get started now on your term paper...  
The Internet Research Paper project is worth a total of 25% of your final grade. The paper itself counts 80% of that 25%, 10% is based on the Phase 1 discussions, and 10% on the Phase 2 discussions. The Phase 1 and 2 discussions are evaluated using the same system used for chapter discussions.

**Your Internet Research Project isn't due until the course is almost over, but you are to work on it for the entire term - starting now! After you read (and understand) the instructions below, you are expected to go to the Internet Research Paper Module and start participating in the Phase 1 discussions.**

One Internet-based research paper is required. This paper is to be written on a topic you propose to the class - and your classmates will assist you (and you them) in organizing and researching your topic. You will write your paper in two phases. In **Phase 1 - the research & discussion phase** - you select a topic from the readings, propose the topic to the class, and locate a few Internet resources which support your topic. Other students are then required to assist you by suggesting additional ideas, web resources, etc. In **Phase two - the submission phase** - you write your paper and submit it to a plagiarism detection website (turnitin.com), and to the class for class discussion.

**In order to receive full credit for your paper, you must follow all of these instructions carefully.**

1. For your paper, you are to use a minimum of 5 internet-based resources relevant to your chosen topic. In addition, you **must incorporate and cite specific comments from the Internet Research Paper Phase 1 Discussions and/or the Student-Led Discussions**. Citations from the students in the course must include the author's name and the date the comment was made. **You will not receive full credit if you do not include and cite student comments!**
2. Write a paper in which you analyze your chosen topic by using material from the Internet websites you and your colleagues locate, information from the textbook, and comments made by your classmates in the various class discussions. **It must be very clear to me that you have incorporated the resources and ideas contributed by your classmates into your paper. You are required to cite them by name and date in your "Works Cited" page.**
3. The minimum length of your paper is 2500 words of original content plus a Works Cited list. **Important note: direct quotes and significantly paraphrased passages from other sources are not counted in determining the "word-count" length of your paper.** The complete URL of each website you use should be referenced on a numbered Works Cited list, and a parenthetical reference [e.g. (4)] made in the text of your paper whenever information from another source is used. Remember, your Works Cited list must also include the names and dates of the individuals whose discussion comments you use in your paper.

Additional instructions for discussing and submitting your paper are included on the documents In the Internet Research Paper Module.

[CLICK HERE](#)

## Step 2. Students discuss their research ideas, develop a topic, and accumulate resources in the Phase 1 Discussions.

DOCUMENT by: William Pelz  
Subject: Develop and discuss your research topic here  
The discussion in Phase 1 requires several steps:

1. Select a topic which interests you from the textbook. (Before you select a topic, read the submissions by the other students, so you don't pick a topic which has already been chosen by another student.)
2. Using your word processing program, write an essay explaining what your topic is, why this topic interests you, and how you are planning to organize your paper.
3. Locate 3 high-quality websites that deal with your topic in a substantive way. (Note: you will need a minimum of 5 websites for your paper.)
4. Copy each website URL (web address) and paste it at the end of your essay.
5. When you have all 3 URL's pasted at the bottom of your essay, click on **RESPOND** below and copy / paste your essay and URLs into the comment field. Use your research topic as the subject field.
6. You will facilitate a discussion on your topic. Your final paper **must** include citations from this discussion.
7. Read and respond to the research paper submissions of **at least 3** other students. Here you are to assist them with ideas to make their paper better. If your response includes a new website which you have found, put the website name and website address in the appropriate fields of your response so that the reader can click on the link to visit the website. In addition, include some information from the website you think might be useful.
8. Continue to participate in these discussion threads until the submission phase begins.

Note: The Phase 1 discussions are graded using the same **Cardinal Rules** and the same **Discussion Rating Scale** as the Student Led Discussions.

When you are ready to submit your research topic essay, click on the **RESPOND** link below.

[CLICK HERE](#)

## Step 3. Students submit their finished paper for class discussion.

DOCUMENT by: William Pelz  
Subject: Submit to Class  
Use this Assignment Page to submit your term paper to the class for the **Phase 2 discussions**. Click on Create Assignment below, and follow the instructions to **copy** your paper from your word processor and **paste** it into the assignment field. Then, submit your term paper to the **Class**.

Two important notes:

1. Do not submit your paper as a file attachment - use Copy/Paste.
2. Be sure to include your "Works Cited" list. The student comments you use in your paper must be cited on this list by name and date.

You should not only read the term papers which you helped to develop, but also several others that interest you, and make appropriate comments to the author. When another student comments on your paper, you should reply. The idea here is to critically analyze and discuss the finished papers.

If you need assistance, contact the "Help Desk" at (800) 875-6269

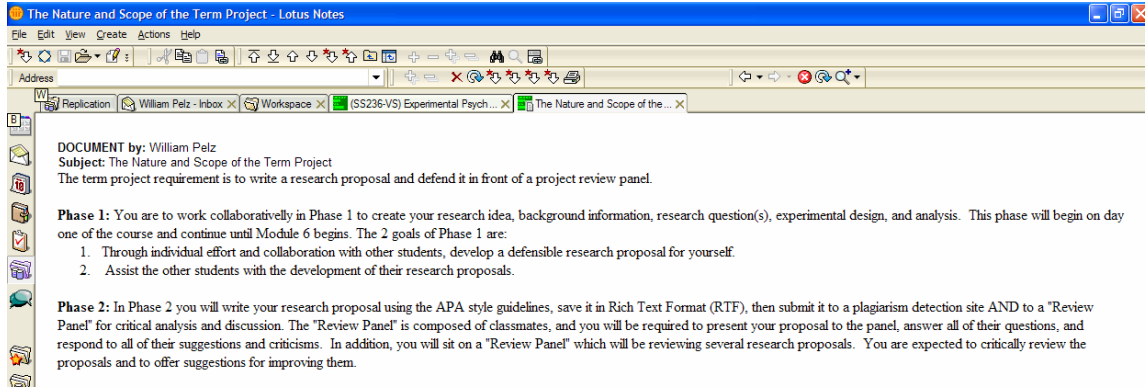
Note: The Phase 2 discussions are graded using the same discussion rating scale as the Student Led Discussions.

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The collaborative research paper assignment not only satisfies the “interaction” requirement, but it also provides each student with access to additional detail and information on a wide variety of issues that have been discussed throughout the semester.

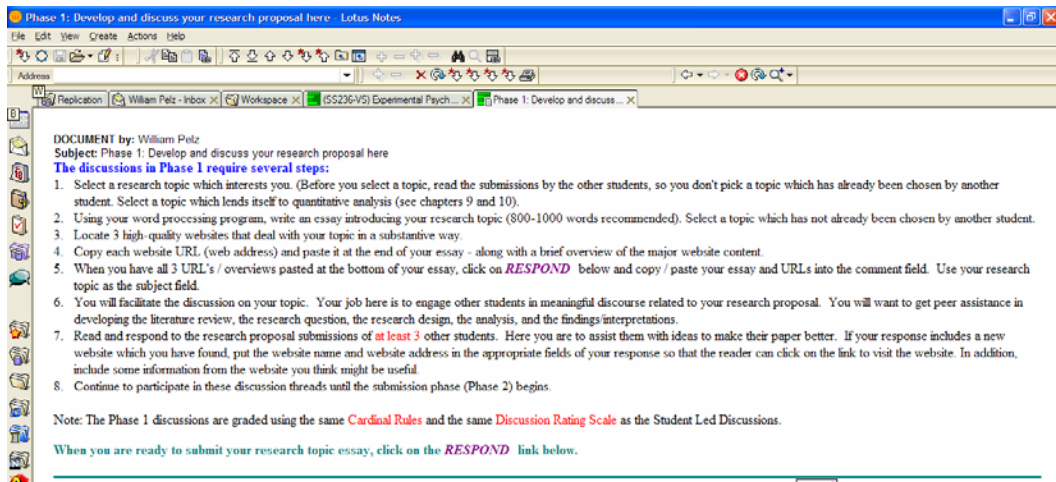
**2. Research Proposal Team Project:** This is similar to the collaborative research paper, but adapted for a ‘skills’ course—in this case Experimental Psychology.

**Step 1. Explain the assignment.**



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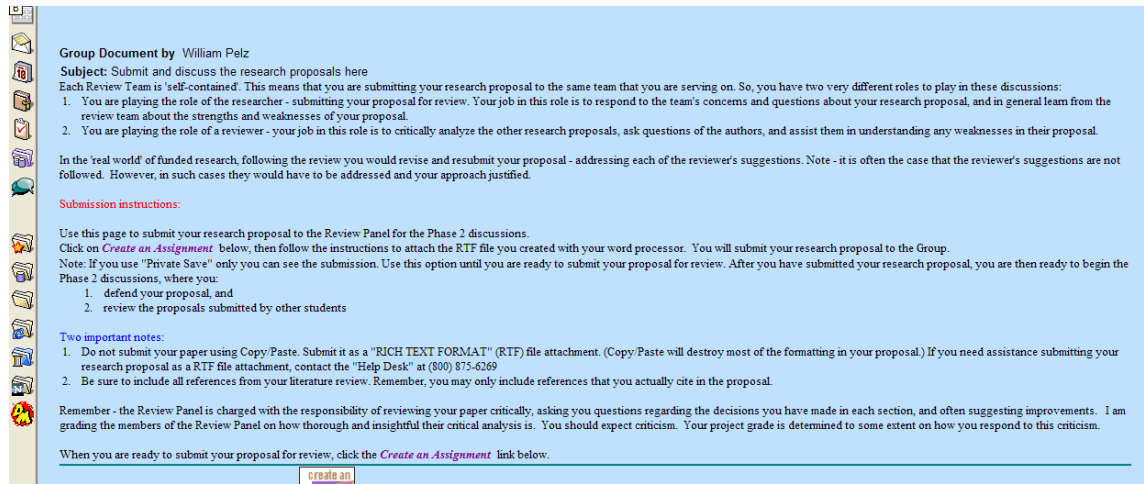
**Step 2: Students select a research topic and collaborate with others to collect resources.**



[CLICK HERE](#)



**Step 3.** Submit the research proposal to a ‘team’ for review and comment. Each student must not only submit her/his own research proposal, but must also be a ‘reviewer’ for the other proposals submitted by team members.



**Group Document by William Pelz**  
**Subject:** Submit and discuss the research proposals here  
 Each Review Team is 'self-contained'. This means that you are submitting your research proposal to the same team that you are serving on. So, you have two very different roles to play in these discussions:  
 1. You are playing the role of the researcher - submitting your proposal for review. Your job in this role is to respond to the team's concerns and questions about your research proposal, and in general learn from the review team about the strengths and weaknesses of your proposal.  
 2. You are playing the role of a reviewer - your job in this role is to critically analyze the other research proposals, ask questions of the authors, and assist them in understanding any weaknesses in their proposal.  
 In the 'real world' of funded research, following the review you would revise and resubmit your proposal - addressing each of the reviewer's suggestions. Note - it is often the case that the reviewer's suggestions are not followed. However, in such cases they would have to be addressed and your approach justified.

**Submission instructions:**  
 Use this page to submit your research proposal to the Review Panel for the Phase 2 discussions.  
 Click on [Create an Assignment](#) below, then follow the instructions to attach the RTF file you created with your word processor. You will submit your research proposal to the Group.  
 Note: If you use "Private Save" only you can see the submission. Use this option until you are ready to submit your proposal for review. After you have submitted your research proposal, you are then ready to begin the Phase 2 discussions, where you:  
 1. defend your proposal, and  
 2. review the proposals submitted by other students

**Two important notes:**  
 1. Do not submit your paper using Copy/Paste. Submit it as a "RICH TEXT FORMAT" (RTF) file attachment. (Copy/Paste will destroy most of the formatting in your proposal.) If you need assistance submitting your research proposal as a RTF file attachment, contact the "Help Desk" at (800) 975-6269  
 2. Be sure to include all references from your literature review. Remember, you may only include references that you actually cite in the proposal.

Remember - the Review Panel is charged with the responsibility of reviewing your paper critically, asking you questions regarding the decisions you have made in each section, and often suggesting improvements. I am grading the members of the Review Panel on how thorough and insightful their critical analysis is. You should expect criticism. Your project grade is determined to some extent on how you respond to this criticism.

When you are ready to submit your proposal for review, click the [Create an Assignment](#) link below.

[create an](#)

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### C. Principle #3: Strive for presence.

Recent research in the field of online learning suggests that discussion responses that add value to a discussion fall into one or more of three categories: Social Presence, Cognitive Presence, or Teaching Presence [1].

Social Presence: When participants in an online course help establish a community of learning by projecting their personal characteristics into the discussion — they present themselves as "real people." There are at least three forms of social presence:

- Affective — The expression of emotion, feelings, and mood
- Interactive — Evidence of reading, attending, understanding, thinking about other's responses
- Cohesive — Responses that build and sustain a sense of 'belongingness', group commitment, ore common goals and objectives

Although much has been written on the difficulty of creating a shared community of learning online, in my experience that just isn't so. In general, I find that online students bond earlier and 'better' than students sitting in the same classroom. To some extent, this is probably because they aren't sitting side-by-side. There is an absence of appearance-based factors that can inhibit self expression and create stereotypical expectations. Further, possibly because of the anonymity of the asynchronous mode, online students tend to self-disclose to a greater extent than those sitting face-to-face.

There are a few formal techniques that promote collegiality. I require that students introduce themselves as an initial condition of participating in the course. This breaks the ice and provides some points of reference for identifying who a student is and where s/he is coming from. I also provide a couple of forums for interpersonal interaction not related to the content of the course. One such forum is called the Bulletin Board, where any class member, including the professor, can post an announcement or pose a question. Students frequently use this area to discuss personal issues, such as "Where are you from?" and

“What’s it like at your college?” Another forum I provide is called “Asynchronous Chat Rooms.” The example below is from the course specified for public observation by the SUNY Learning Network [2].

**ASYNCHRONOUS CHAT ROOMS - MODULE MENU**  
 (SS151-V2) Introductory Psychology (SL2)  
 Click the blue triangle to expand/collapse section.

- ▼ Chat Room Instructions
  - ★ [How to participate in the Chat Rooms](#)
- ▼ Gab-fest
  - ★ ▼ Social Hour
    - ▼ Hi & welcome. Anyone taking anymore online classes? (Dionne Trotman 01/20/2004)
    - [Hello !! \(Luanne Turchetti 01/21/2004\)](#)
    - ▼ on line classes (Maureen Riley 02/07/2004)
      - [Yes class is a challenge, but interesting too \(Dionne Trotman 02/21/2004\)](#)
      - [to Angela Denson \(Dionne Trotman 02/21/2004\)](#)
      - [Angela Denson-In Response to Ch. 5 Advantages & Disadvantages of Time-Out Discus \(Amy Austin 03/04/2004\)](#)
  - ▼ Gripe-fest
    - ★ ▼ [Get it out of your system!](#)
      - [To Maurene \(Dionne Trotman 04/05/2004\)](#)
  - ▼ The Suggestion Box
    - ★ ▼ [Make it a better world - one course at a time!](#)
      - [In regards to the internet research papers \(Stacia Mureness 03/24/2004\)](#)
      - ▼ [Controversial topics... \(William Pelz/SUNY 03/25/2004\)](#)
        - [not approving topics also reduces headaches on the students part too.... \(Stacia Mureness 03/25/2004\)](#)
  - ▼ Antidepressants
    - ★ ▼ [Laughter is the Best Medicine!](#)
      - [Southern University Psychology Joke \(Amy Austin 03/05/2004\)](#)
      - [LOL \(Stacia Mureness 03/24/2004\)](#)
  - ▼ Private Chat Rooms
    - ★ [By Invitation Only](#)

[CLICK HERE](#)

**Cognitive Presence:** The extent to which the professor and the students are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained discourse (discussion) in a community of inquiry.

- Cognitive presence can be demonstrated by introducing factual, conceptual, and theoretical knowledge into the discussion.
- The value of such a response will depend upon the source, clarity, accuracy and comprehensiveness of the knowledge.

Student led discussions are a major learning activity in most of my online courses. These discussions provide a great opportunity for students to present to one another the important information that constitutes formal study in the discipline. Of course, for academic authenticity and integrity, the information provided in the student submissions must be both accurate and comprehensive. I treat each discussion submission as if it is an answer to a test question—and I grade it using a rubric which I share with the students in the course syllabus documents they have access to at all times.

## The Discussion Rubric:

DOCUMENT by: William Pelz  
 Subject: How to earn an "A" on every discussion!  
 In this course there are several different types of graded discussions:

- WEBSITE DISCUSSIONS:** Your assignment is to locate, review and lead a discussion on a website that presents new information relevant to the content of the module. In addition, you must participate in the discussions of at least 2 additional websites.
- CHAPTER DISCUSSIONS:** Your assignment is to ask a good critical-thinking question for **each chapter** and facilitate the discussion of that question. In addition to leading the discussion of your question, you must participate in the discussion of at least 3 additional questions in **each chapter**. All modules have two or more chapter discussions, and the discussions on **each chapter** are **graded separately** - using the grading scale below.
- INTERNET RESEARCH PAPER DISCUSSIONS:** The Internet Research Paper counts as 25% of your final course grade, and has three graded components. You are required to participate in the **INTERNET RESEARCH PAPER** discussions throughout the course. There are three graded components to the Internet Research Paper assignment:
  - Phase 1 Discussions = 10%
  - Phase 2 Discussions = 10%
  - The Final Draft of your paper = 80%

**Discussion Rubric:**  
 Each discussion post is graded according to the following rubric.

Points	Interpretation	Grading criteria
4	Excellent (A)	The comment is accurate, original, relevant, teaches us something new, and is well written. Four point comments add substantial teaching presence to the course, and stimulate additional thought about the issue under discussion.
3	Above Average (B)	The comment lacks at least one of the above qualities, but is above average in quality. A three point comment makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the issue being discussed.
2	Average (C)	The comment lacks two or three of the required qualities. Comments which are based upon personal opinion or personal experience often fall within this category.
1	Minimal (D)	The comment presents little or no new information. However, one point comments may provide important social presence and contribute to a collegial atmosphere.
0	Unacceptable (F)	The comment adds no value to the discussion.
No penalty	Excellent Subject	The subject field conveys the main point of the comment. The reader clearly understands the main point of the comment before reading it.
1 point penalty	Minimal Subject	The subject field provides key word(s) only. The reader knows the general area that the comment deals with.
2 point penalty	Subject field is unacceptable	The subject field provides little or no information about the comment.

**Discussion Grading Scale:**

[CLICK HERE](#)

Each student asks an ‘original (non-duplicated) question, then facilitates the discussion on that question, for every chapter. With around 25 students in a course, this usually satisfies the ‘comprehensive coverage of the discipline’ issue. The previously discussed instructions, along with this rubric, address the ‘accuracy’ issue. The final component of the student-led discussion strategy is to apply a grading scale to the discussions. Students are given daily feedback on their discussion post grades, and can judge their progress and manage their time on the course accordingly.

## The Discussion Rating Scale:

DOCUMENT by: William Pelz  
 Subject: The Discussion Rating Scale  
**Discussion Grading Scale:**

Each **Website Discussion**, **Chapter Discussion**, and the **Phase 1** and **Phase 2** Internet Research Paper Discussion is graded separately. Remember that there are several discussions in every module, and the scale below applies to each discussion separately.

Discussion Grade	Number of quality points received in the discussion
A	31 - 39
B	25 - 30
C	12 - 24
D	6 - 11
F	0 - 5

**Remember!!** - There are several discussions in each Module. Each discussion is graded separately. This means that for a module having 1 website discussion and 2 chapter discussions, you must earn at least 31 points in **each discussion** in order to get all "A"s. For example, if you earn 6 points in one discussion, 24 in another, and 35 in a third, your grades for those discussions will be "D", "C", and "A".

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**Teaching Presence:** Defined: “Teaching presence is the facilitation and direction of cognitive and social process for the realization of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes [1].” There are two ways that the professor and the students can add teaching presence to a discussion:

1. By facilitating the discussion:
  - a. Identifying areas of agreement and disagreement
  - b. Seeking to reach consensus / understanding
  - c. Encouraging, acknowledging and reinforcing student contributions
  - d. Setting a climate for learning
  - e. Drawing in participants / prompting discussion
  - f. Assessing the efficacy of the process
  
2. By direct instruction:
  - a. Presenting content and questions
  - b. Focusing the discussion
  - c. Summarizing the discussion
  - d. Confirming understanding
  - e. Diagnosing misperceptions
  - f. Injecting knowledge from diverse sources
  - g. Responding to technical concerns

Striving for cognitive, social, and teaching presence has consumed much of my course development attention of late. To my delight and gratification, I have discovered that it is both possible and desirable to merge this principle with the other two. Students, through appropriately designed interactive assignments, can assist the professor in providing ample quantities of all three ‘presences’ in an asynchronous online environment.

**The “Two Cardinal Rules” of Discussion:** Several years ago, while browsing through a threaded discussion, I noticed that the ‘subjects’ my students were creating for their discussion posts were not usually very informative. I had an epiphany! The subject field of a discussion post, which becomes the web link to the discussion post, should provide an “advance organizer” for the comment the student is making. When I, or another student, read the subject of a discussion post, it should get me (us) mentally prepared for the discussion comment. With this in mind, I created the “Two Cardinal Rules”:

DISCUSSIONS COMMONS MAY MENU DOCUMENT DOCUMENT

**DOCUMENT by:** William Pelz

**Subject:** The TWO CARDINAL RULES of Discussions:

A "Cardinal Rule" is a rule that is so important that, if you break it, there are **dire** (...evil in great degree; dreadful; dismal; horrible; terrible) **consequences**. **If you do not follow the instructions on this page you will probably not pass this course!**

When you are participating in a discussion, each response you post will have **two fields** that you must complete correctly in order to get credit for your response: the **Comment field** and the **Subject field**. No matter how terrific your **comment** is, if your **subject** isn't acceptable, your post will not receive full credit. **I suggest that you write your comment first, then write the subject.**

**Cardinal Rule #1: Your comment must introduce relevant, new information.** Your job here is to provide **new** information which is appropriate to the issue being discussed. I have posted other documents in the Course Information area which detail this requirement, but, in brief, here are the major things I look for in your discussion comments:

1. Is your comment accurate?
2. Is it relevant to the issue under discussion?
3. Have you taught us anything new?
4. Have you added to the academic atmosphere of this course?

**Important notes:**

1. It is OK to respond with non-informative comments. In fact, sometimes it is a good idea to thank someone for their assistance or simply let them know that you agree with what they have said. Non-academic comments such as these can add valuable social presence to the course, and help to create a sense of collegiality. However, only comments that add knowledge will be graded.
2. If you copy/paste information from websites or other sources, you must use quotes and provide the citation.

**Cardinal Rule #2: You must create a subject field that conveys the essence of your main point.** You are required to create a "Subject" for your discussion posts that conveys the main point of your comment. It is **not enough** to use the topic, or just a "keyword" or "key phrase" as your subject - you must create a short (no more than about 10 words) summary of the main point you are making in your comment.

The goal here is to state the main idea of your comment in your subject. Remember - you can't just mention the topic you are commenting on, you must summarize your main point. This requirement is intended to accomplish 2 goals:

1. It requires the author to think about and clearly state the main point of his/her comment. To do this, the author must have a clear understanding of the material, and this aids in learning and memory.
2. It provides the reader with advance information which is helpful in organizing and learning the content of the comment. The reader should be able to determine the essence of your comment just by reading your Subject.

[CLICK HERE](#)

### III. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Yes, I am proud of my contributions to online pedagogy, I think my online courses are good, and I humbly accepted the Sloan-C award. But it would be ludicrous for me to take credit for any of the strategies, techniques, or innovations I have presented and discussed in this article. My so-called innovations are the direct result of my association with the incredible professionals at the SUNY Learning Network, Peter Shea, Alexandra Pickett, Erik Fredericksen (now at Cornell) and Karen Swan (now at Kent State). Our late-night, often heated discussions over student, faculty, and course management issues provided much-needed clarification for my sometimes too narrow understanding of asynchronous higher education.

### IV. REFERENCES

1. **Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T., and Archer, W.** Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education. *The Internet and Higher Education* 2(2-3): 1-19, 2000.
2. Observe a course: <http://sln.suny.edu>.

### V. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Bill Pelz** is Professor of Psychology at Herkimer County Community College. He joined the faculty of HCCC in August of 1968, the second year the college was in operation. During his 36 year tenure at HCCC he has served as Chair of the Humanities and Social Science Division and Director of Distance Learning, but has always returned to his first love — teaching. In 1994 he was presented with the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, and in 2003 the Sloan-C Award for Excellence in Online Teaching — most cherished prizes. Bill has published an odd assortment of scholarly and academic articles, most recently focused on the area of student and faculty satisfaction with asynchronous teaching and learning. His current research interest is in isolating the pedagogical factors which influence student

achievement in virtual learning environments. In addition to teaching full-time on the Internet, Bill is also the Coordinator of the HCCC Internet Academy, the HCCC Campus Instructional Design Specialist, and the Lead Trainer for the SUNY Learning Network, having trained in excess of 1000 SUNY faculty during the past five years. He currently represents The State University of New York in the discipline of Psychology on the national Merlot Project, which is assembling a collection of high quality web-based learning objects for use in higher education.