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Building Peer-to-Peer Connections in AO Courses: A Group Protocol

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A considerable body of literature supports the assertion that college students are more successful when they have connections with instructors, but also with peers in their courses. In the Teacher Education Program at ISU, we have expanded the area of students we serve, with fewer and fewer of our teacher candidates living in Pocatello. We are offering more and more asynchronous online courses. Many instructors in our program have become concerned about how isolated our candidates are becoming, and the effects that could have on their success in our program and later, in their careers.

In response to this concern, I developed a protocol for an AO course that requires students to meet with each other in real time, in person when possible. My original intention was to facilitate conversations about their experiences in field placements, but I was pleased to learn that these groups served several other functions: the students met every other week, and I attended at least one group meeting for each group. I found that, before students started on their official protocol/assignment, they were having the kinds of informal conversations that result in peer-to-peer connections, something missing when they aren't seated together and waiting for a class to start. I also found that students would ask each other class-related procedural questions (due dates for other assignments, how to do different projects, etc.). These kinds of questions end up being an endless string of emails for many AO instructors, where they might be answered in a seated class by leaning over to their elbow peer. With the groups, peers were helping each other, resulting in freeing up email time for me, as the instructor.

The intention of this session would be to share my experiences and the protocol (including methods for grading) for these facilitated peer-to-peer social interactions in online courses, as a means to mitigate the isolation sometimes experienced by students taking courses online.