



## The Concord Consortium e-Learning Model for Online Courses

*The Concord Consortium, a non-profit research and development organization, has researched, designed, taught, and trained others to design and teach online since it was founded in 1994 by Robert Tinker. Its most successful project, the Virtual High School®, became an independent organization -- Virtual High School, Inc. -- in 2001. The Concord Model presented here is distilled from our seven years of experience in this new arena.*

The following nine key characteristics define The Concord Consortium's approach to delivering quality e-Learning:

**Asynchronous collaboration.** Participants don't have to be logged on to the course simultaneously; they work in an asynchronous environment in which text-based, threaded discussion and collaborative problem solving form the core learning strategy. Compared to synchronous tools (chats, shared whiteboards, shared applications, and audio conferencing), these asynchronous discussion groups are less expensive, more thoughtful, and far easier to schedule, particularly across time zones. This means that participants can explore the curriculum at their own pace, taking time to reflect carefully and record their thinking.

**Explicit schedules.** Instructors of online courses relying on collaborative discussions schedule lessons within a specific timeframe so participants can share similar experiences and insights. One major topic provides the focus for the week, with a predetermined sequence of activities, discussion, and reflection. For instance, if the content of a video is essential for an upcoming discussion, then the schedule must specify that everyone view the video clip sometime within a few days prior to the discussion. Each participant is then required to make an initial contribution to the discussion. Over the next few days, participants respond to the comments already posted. The best schedule preserves the "anytime, anywhere" flexibility of online courses, while also ensuring that all participants bring similar experience and currency to the discussion.

**Expert facilitation.** Online courses are led by a qualified person specifically trained in online facilitation. Leading an online discussion is a skill that is learned; it is not sufficient to simply assign an online course to even a highly respected classroom teacher. Teaching strategies that work well in a brick and mortar classroom can have unintended effects online, halting rather than deepening dialogue and learning. Like a good teacher in a traditional classroom, the expert facilitator doesn't ask all the questions or provide too many answers. However, effective online community leaders use many other strategies to stimulate student exchange and guide the conversation toward important content, intervening in discussions only when it serves to move the group more clearly toward learning objectives.

**Inquiry pedagogy.** Designers create effective online courses with many specific elements that contribute to sound pedagogy for inquiry learning. Graphics, simulations, role-plays, and visualizations, if used effectively, help learners explore and make sense of content. Course objectives are explicit and matched to the measures used in qualitative assessments. Instructors establish a clear set of rubrics for postings to ensure that evidence of learning is embedded in the discussions.

**Community building.** Learning through collaboration requires participants to take intellectual risks. It is the responsibility of course designers and instructors to proactively design and nurture a community culture in which participants are supportive and honest. The facilitator establishes and shapes intellectual and emotional norms, modeling appropriate behavior and steering harmful input toward higher

learning ground for all. There are many ways to foster this sense of intellectual trust and safety. Providing class time for participants to become acquainted is an essential first step. This is achieved by leading fun ice-breaking activities in the beginning and sustaining a social life for the group with a café or student lounge discussion thread where non-course topics are welcome throughout the course. Written expectations about good group processes are also helpful. For example, instructors encourage participants to use inclusive and collective language that focuses on content in discussion posts ("Tim says..." instead of "Tim, you said..."). Anonymous polls, role playing, use of smaller discussion groups with rotating roles, or weekly online meetings are all effective techniques for building and maintaining group cohesion.

**Limited enrollment.** There are between 12 and 25 participants in a class to keep collaborative learning manageable. Online discussions need a critical mass, so smaller is not necessarily better. Sub-groups with as few as two or three are useful for the intense exchange required to produce something complex, like a cumulative project. Slightly larger teams of four to five work well for focused dialogue on readings, video clips, simulations, or other shared experiences. In an online environment, these subgroups remain part of the public record so everyone can glean the insights shared in small group exchanges.

**High-quality materials.** Course designers include the widest feasible range of media and activities to appeal to different styles of learning. In addition to Internet resources, they effectively use books, kits, labs, and other media to supplement online materials. In a science course, for example, students view a visual simulation or use modeling software to understand a concept. Offline, they conduct experiments with simple materials. Web-based graphics or content shed light on other aspects of the subject. Students engage in explorations, surveys, creative works, and self-reflection, as appropriate. Multiple, short assignments using a variety of approaches and media help preserve course flexibility, reinforce key concepts, and nurture different strengths.

**Purposeful virtual spaces.** In a brick and mortar classroom, the structure of conversation is fluid and invisible. We know or learn to do our social chatting before and after class and during breaks. When the instructor asks if people have questions about the assignment, that's when we ask. Online, course designers create explicit structures so the community gets what it needs without interrupting the flow of content-based discussions. Typically included are a "Student Lounge," a "Questions about Assignments," a "Technical Questions," and a "Class Meeting" discussion space for debriefing course experiences.

**Ongoing assessment.** The idea of using one high-stakes test to measure achievement may work well in a closely monitored classroom. Online however, assessment is a continuous, ongoing process. Instructors find evidence of achievement in participants' daily contributions to online discussions, and learn each student's unique voice and approach to solving problems through their postings. The online version of a literature course, for instance, includes regular small group discussions on assigned readings and essays or longer projects, which undergo a sequence of peer review, revision, and final submission for grading. Instructors hold daily submissions to standards that foster constructive dialogue and learning by communicating clear objectives for project outcomes and specific criteria for postings.