Online courses provide students with an array of advantages. Access to an asynchronous environment opens the door to learning for non-traditional students who may not be able to attend classes far from home, during the hours they need to be working, or at a cost they are unable to afford. On demand “just-in-time” resources and dynamic personalized learning pathways let students move at their own pace to cover the information specific to them. Mastery-Based assessments push learning to an even more student-centric system. But these high-tech online learning solutions also create new hurdles.

As educators we understand the importance of “place” in activating student learning. We struggle daily to establish a classroom that provides a safe learning environment. Built into our lessons are customs and routines designed to welcome all learners, encourage risk-taking, cultivate critical thinking, and foster communication skills. How can we do this when students are not meeting in person and rarely meeting at the same time?

Over the last decade of teaching online I’ve found connecting students through discourse and dialogue is very difficult in a learning management system. Discussion boards, the very tools designed to connect students, tend to be clunky, impersonal, and contrived. The online learners I have worked with quickly tire of the same format assigned: post, wait, reply, fail to make meaningful connections, repeat next week.

Or worse. Some students are simply afraid to post. What if their thoughtful reflections appear remedial? Could their opinions offend other students and lead to conflict? Will their peers snicker at the grammar and spelling mistakes as they learn English as a second language?

Harmonize, a new app (or “LTI”) from 42 Lines provides a new approach to delivering interactive discussions. It integrates with your LMS; I found it easy to add to my Canvas Course with just a couple steps. Once installed I was able to post discussion as graded assignments, create ungraded discussion posts, or allow students to create their own discussions to support their group projects or ask questions of the whole class.

Compared to other discussion platforms I’ve used, Harmonize is easy from the instructional side. Instructors will find they can quickly and easily post questions with engaging images, video, audio files, and more without having to learn a single line of code. This means your online scholars can log into the same LMS they’ve always used and have an experience authentic to their own online social presence. No more carpal tunnel inducing text threads to endlessly scroll through in search of a meaningful post with which to connect. Instead they are greeted with a “card view” format reminiscent of Hollywood Squares. Along with text they see the faces of their peers or an image uploaded by the responder.
Leveraging a rich media interface similar to social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, Harmonize creates a place familiar to online learners, yet safe and accountable. At first glance it is intuitive to “flip a card”, read a full post, leave reactions like a thumbs up or question marks, and discover an inviting opportunity to respond. Anonymous posting is also an available option that prevents students from knowing the original post writer and commentator while still providing instructors the information necessary to hold students accountable for any inappropriate or off task behavior.

On each post or comment students can leave a text reply, upload an image, embed a gif, or even record a video response. Tagging other students in a response is also simple. Type the “@” any place in a post and you’ll immediately see a list populated of everyone in the course, students and instructors. Click the person you want to tag and they’re notified to check the conversation. This means it is easier for students to share what they’re thinking according to their own learning style and engage their colleagues without being bogged down with technical issues. Students who usually type the least are soon recording the most thoughtful video and audio comments.

This past semester I used Harmonize for the first time in an online course for graduate students working towards a Masters of Education at Mount Saint Mary’s University in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Having already used the native discussion feature in Canvas I was worried my learners would struggle with a new tool introduced over halfway through the course, but they quickly embraced it. After publishing the Harmonize LTI assignment, I assumed I needed to make a “how to” screencast to help the students navigate the new interface. Checking the discussion post the next day I found this completely unnecessary. Half the class had already left their own responses and comments to posts by their peers. Videos, images, and text entries came in twice as fast as any previous discussion activities. Educators recognize an effective learning tool when they see it, and respond accordingly.

My experience assessing was much more efficient than any other online discussion I’d facilitated in the past as well. It was impressive how easily I could access each student’s work and gauge their participation rates right inside the Canvas Speedgrader. With just a couple of minutes review for each submission I assessed their original posts, read all of their comments aggregated in one simple window, and was even provided a percentage rating of their activity and engagement across the entire discussion. A rubric in Canvas makes it even faster to grade a post, and connecting your plagiarism checker will provide an originality score for each submission. This means you can spend more time leaving high-quality feedback for each individual student and less time entering scores.

The Harmonize LTI for Canvas made it easy to leverage the benefits of an online learning environment and avoid many of the pitfalls by creating interactive, engaging, media-rich discussion activities. Students learn to asynchronously connect with each other, the content, the curriculum, and create a sense of community by communicating in meaningful online conversations. The easy-to-use Harmonize interface and quality data collection tools allow you to focus on teaching instead of troubleshooting.
**HARMONIZE SCORECARD**  |  Michael Hakkarinen

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OVERALL</th>
<th>The Harmonize LTI for Canvas made it easy to leverage the benefits of an online learning environment and avoid many of the pitfalls by creating interactive, engaging, media-rich discussion activities.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EASE OF USE</td>
<td>Students were able to jump right into the discussions without any tech support or instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODERN &amp; INTUITIVE INTERFACE</td>
<td>The only issue I’ve had is when you’re making a graded discussion and you need to click the &quot;Edit&quot; button to create a topic title, description, and add resources. If not you end up creating the first topic post which is confusing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUNCTIONALITY/ SUPPORT</td>
<td>The tour of the LTI with Tricia made it really easy to start using Harmonize and I didn't need any support, so maybe I shouldn't be rating this?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Harmonize  
Take Discussions Further  |  by 42LINES

harmonize.42lines.net