

Creating Online Discussions

Tips for Creating Online Discussion

Discussions in an online course are the equivalent of class discussions in a face-to-face class. Discussions might be designed for one of the following purposes:

- To provide an open question and answer forum,
- Encourage critical or creative thinking,
- Achieve social interaction and community building-- have the students get to know each other personally and intellectually,
- Validate experiences, and
- Support students in their own reflections and inquiries.

Interactivity

KEY CONCEPT

“Studies indicate that frequent, meaningful and “just in time” planned interactivity in an online course helps to keep students motivated and to make them feel like part of a learning community. Communicating and learning together allows students to share with each other their questions, frustrations and ideas, and to receive help and feedback from a supportive peer group (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).”

Basic Rule

Don't post questions soliciting basic facts, or questions for which there is an obvious “yes/no” response. The reason for this is obvious: once one student responds, there is not much more to say!

8 Tips for Effective Discussions

The following tips have been adapted from [Teaching Online: A Practical Guide](#) by Susan Ko.

1. **Start the major topic thread yourself** - Unless you allow students to create their own threads for particular assignments, generally students will create threads without necessity – this can derail the effectiveness of participation.
2. **Narrow down topics -- an overly broad topic will lead to fragmented discussion** - Provide sub topics based on readings, a website link, assignments or weekly lecture. A series of two or three guided questions will allow for greater variety insight and participation.
3. **Organize forums and threads that are chronological or themed** - Discussions should complement the class content but also serve as a reminder for the overall sequence of the course. Label the discussions appropriately (i.e. Week 1) and consider having students respond midweek to the main discussion and by the end of the week to other student’s posts for maximum student dialogue.
4. **Mention students by name** – If you are participating in the posts yourself, clarify and comment on student’s posts by adding a clear subject line and copying the portions you are responding to.
5. **Provide a brief yet relevant context for the post** – don’t simply ask your topic or provide questions to answer; include a short lead-in to contextualise the discussion within the larger framework of your course.

6. **Establish a pattern of frequent response** - depending on the weighting of your discussion criteria, integrate discussions weekly or bi weekly and consider valuing quality rather than quantity to the posts.
7. **Facilitate and build on participation** – You shouldn't respond to every post, rather you should strive to generate feedback that responds to a whole train of thought and summarizes key points of the discussion. If you don't intend to participate in the discussions yourself, then you should make an effort to post a general response every few weeks in the content area acknowledging, summarizing, commenting or integrating student views into the course -- let students know you are "listening."
8. **Be aware of cultural patterns as well as differences in personal styles of discussions** – some students may not engage in "volunteered responses" and others may not be comfortable responding to questions that ask to divulge personal experiences – don't make students feel boxed in by the way you frame your questions.

KEY DEFINITION**Discussion Terms**

A message added to a discussion board is a *post*. A series of posts in response to an initial message (or to each other) is a *thread*. Thus you will often hear reference to threaded discussion forums. Discussion boards are an **asynchronous tool**, accessible at different times by different people. Don't confuse this with chat which is a **synchronous discussion**, such as the type provided in the FOL Chat and Collaborate tools.

Prepare a strategy for potentially controversial topics. If you haven't already, it's a good idea to create an online code of conduct or rules of netiquette for your discussion forum.

Providing a sample response to one of your questions can set the tone of your discussions going forward and will set a clear level of expectation for your students.

Additional Resources

- [Mastering Online Discussion Board Facilitation](#) (PDF) from *edutopia.org*
- [Designing Online Discussions: Key Questions](#) from *Brown University*
- [Online Discussions: Tips for Instructors](#) from *University of Waterloo*
- [Generating Engaging and Online Discussions](#) (PDF) from *University of Oregon*
- [Using Online Discussions to Encourage Critical Thinking](#) from *Dukes University's CIT*
- [Creating and Sustaining Effective Online Discussions: Strategies to Foster Critical Thinking and Student Voice](#) (Video Seminar) from *University of Central Florida*



View the [D2L Community Instructor Video Resources](#) for technical help using the discussions tool in FOL.