

Online Teaching Strategies: Module 3

Managing and Facilitating Online Discussions

Introduction

Most education researchers agree that interaction is critical to learning. In the online classroom a significant amount of that interaction occurs in discussion forums. However just creating forums and asking questions does not necessarily mean you will have a successful discussion or meaningful interactions between yourself and your students or your students will have quality interactions with one another. In order for these interactions to contribute to a quality educational opportunity they must be managed and facilitated.

Why is discussion so important? The answer is; engagement. Engaged students learn more and more efficiently than students who are not engaged. Engaged students are thinking about the course topics, analyzing their own participation and relating the new information you are providing to what they already know. Student who are not engaged do what they are assigned to do and no more. There is no critical thinking reflection.

The Facilitation Process

What does good facilitation look like? The first and most important aspect of good facilitation is understanding that this is an active process that requires and investment of your time and your expertise. Facilitating discussions is teaching.

Good facilitation means spending time in the discussion forums. **You must participate!** This does not mean that you must be omnipresent, answering every post of every student within minutes of when the post is made. It means that students must view you as an active participant who is aware of what is happening and is as engaged in the discussion as they are. While you shouldn't *respond* to all student posts you must *read* all of the posts.

You have to be prepared, especially in the first few weeks, to answer questions from students about how to use the discussion forum tool. Students may not understand what you expect. They may not read the guidelines you create. If students do not participate on their own from the beginning you must create the impression that you are aware of their level of participation.

You must be explicit in setting limits of your own participation. For example; I will read and respond to discussion posts five out of seven days per week, taking Saturday and Sunday off.

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Respond to three or four students per week, rotating who you respond to so by the end of the course, you have commented directly on all of your students' postings a few times. Summarizing the weekly discussions is a good way to demonstrate an awareness of the discussion without participating so actively it stifles student-to-student interactions.

Discourage students from using email to contact you regarding discussion posts. If you are active and participating, students with questions should be able to get a timely response by posting their questions in the forums. This will allow you to reach the entire class with answers to common questions and cut down on the time it takes to answer a potential blizzard of student email.

Be very specific about the quality and content of the posts you expect. Model examples of good posts and be prepared to do so from time to time. Almost every class you teach will have at least one or two students with little or no experience taking online classes. Modeling good discussion posts is one way to ease the slope of the learning curve for these students.

Be prepared to guide discussions back on track if they wander too far into socializing. By their nature, discussions are less formal than other academic writing but they should still be learning-focused. Your discussion forum should have a *Student Lounge* section where off-topic conversations may be redirected.

Provide clear, concise, explicit guidelines. If you expect students to quote or cite the textbook, you need to tell them that. If you expect a certain length set in number of words or paragraphs, then you need to set those standards clearly. Establish a naming convention for post titles (LastName_topic for example) and model that so you can easily find and differentiate between the different students' posts.

Set early deadlines for initial responses so your students have time to respond in a meaningful way. If initial posts and follow up responses are all due on the last day of the work week, students responding will not have anything to respond to until the end of the week, which means responses will not be well thought out or researched. The initial post should be within a few days of the start of the course module with follow up posts due by the end of the module.

Use the discussion forums as a collaboration tool. It is logistically difficult to do group work in an online course but discussion forums can be used to facilitate group work. Forums can be used for brainstorming by the entire group, or break off groups could be assigned. For example, you could use a discussion forum to conduct a problem-solving activity. You could post a problem and require each learner to present a possible solution. Your students could then evaluate each of the ideas and decide on the best solution.

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Why Online Students Hate Discussions

Students provide feedback on what they think of discussions and not all of this feedback is positive. Here are some examples from courses here at EP and elsewhere.

1. The instructor did not participate at all in the weekly discussions. *The student was right, I looked*
2. Absolutely NO PARTICIPATION by the instructor... WHAT DID I PAY FOR?
Ditto
3. The feedback from the professor was slow and sparse... *Yes it was.*
4. The course discussions... were largely useless and very poorly explained. The instructor would post absurdly simple questions and everyone would rehash the same answers... *An accurate evaluation of the discussion forums in this course.*
5. I felt that having to respond to two students and comment on our responses was fairly time consuming... *Especially considering they were only valued at 10% of the overall grade.*
6. The mutual admiration society....
"I like the part where you talk about your cat. VERY FUNNY!!"
"Your paper was very inspirational!"
"GOOD JOB! GREAT RESEARCH PAPER!"

Good discussions therefore, from students' perspectives have robust instructor presence, ample, timely feedback, complex, and open-ended questions rooted in the course materials that encourage critical thinking and analysis. These discussions should have values relative to their overall grade that reflect the time and effort required to participate in them and they should be facilitated so they contain meaningful, learning-focused posts.

Easy, right?