

# Online Teaching Strategies: Module 3

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## Student Led Discussion

### Motivation and Purpose

Student led discussion is valuable for a number of related and unrelated reasons. Primarily, student-led discussions forums lead to improved interactions between students, enhance the sense of community in the virtual classroom, and encourage students to participate in structured online discussions.

As we discussed earlier in the first part of this module, online discussion follows a different pedagogical path than face-to-face discussions. With student led discussions many of the goals are the same as with instructor led online discussions but the roles adopted by both you and your students are quite different.

### Why Student-led?

In student-led discussions you are asking your students to take practical and meaningful roles in your virtual classroom. When you as the instructor lead a discussion there is an unspoken acceptance that you are the leader. Your opinions have more value and your opinions have greater sway than those of your students. Even if you explicitly urge students to behave otherwise, it can be difficult for students to ignore the traditional student-instructor paradigm.

By ceding this leadership role you enable students to ask questions and challenge the statements of their peers. Students in peer-led discussions report being less intimidated and inhibited in their participation than students in instructor-led discussions. Discussions led by students often involve deeper, more meaningful interactions than instructor-led discussions. An analysis of posts made in the two types of discussions (Poole, 2000) showed that when students led discussions their peers posted more frequently and those posts were longer and more detailed.

### Role

Student-led discussion does not mean you have no presence or role in the class discussions. Even in student-led discussions student satisfaction is directly correlated to students' perception of a strong teacher presence. The main difference is what you do and say when you engage in the class discussions. Rather than acting as a 'leader' you use what is sometimes called a *direction from within approach*

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You may actually increase your level of participation in discussion by addressing misconceptions, helping students who are struggling to grasp the concepts, and contributing to the discussions as a participant.

## Facilitator Roles

When establishing student-led discussion keep the roles they assume as the facilitator in mind;

1. Set the agenda.
  - a. Define objectives
  - b. Offer guiding questions
  - c. Create scenarios
2. Clarify the Purpose.
  - a. What is expected?
  - b. What outcome is expected?
3. Encourage Participation.
  - a. Create a trusting atmosphere
4. Moderate the discussion.
  - a. Ensure the discussion is not dominated by one or two participants.
  - b. Invite less aggressive members of the class to contribute
5. Keep the discussion focused.
  - a. The facilitator keeps the original purpose of the discussion and objectives in mind as the conversation progresses
6. Encourage multiple views.
7. Bring the discussion to a logical, satisfying conclusion.
  - a. Summarize the highlights.
  - b. Recognize individuals who made valuable contributions.

## Your Role

You have two different roles in student-led discussions. The first, your direct role, is as a participant. Even if students are leading the discussion you still define the general instructional parameters, establish the framework of rules for participation and establish the physical structure of these discussions within the learning management system. These all occur before the discussion begins, but while it is going on your role continues. You;

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1. Assign the readings or determine the general parameters of the discussion.
2. Work with the facilitators to ensure they are prepared to lead the discussion successfully
  - a. Make sure the facilitators know how to use the tools (Blackboard discussion forums)
  - b. Make sure readings are readily available.
  - c. Define the deadline for the discussions.
  - d. Contribute to the discussion as a participant.

Once the discussion has been brought to a conclusion you assume another role. Evaluator. You must determine how to grade or otherwise assess the quality of the participation of the student facilitators as well as the participants.

While some faculty feel that student-led discussions are a way to save time, as you can see, a well-run, robust course discussion; student or instructor led, does not take place by chance, but instead is the product of good planning, solid execution, and significant elbow grease.