Ten Tips for Fostering Effective Online Discussions

1. **Discussions should be integrated** into the course as part of your assessment strategy.
   a. Participation should be mandatory.
   b. Discussion participation must have sufficient value to make it worth the investment of student's time and effort.
   c. The topics and questions should be central to the course's principal goals.
   d. Select exam questions or other assessment items from discussions and let students know you intend to do so.

2. **Offer detailed directions** with clear expectations for the scope, approach, and deadlines for your student's discussion posts.
   a. Provide a model for the ideal discussion post.

3. **Integrate research** either in the form of web research or using resources provided in your Blackboard site;
   a. You might have them research hydraulic fracturing in Science or Information Assurance topics in IEEE magazine.

4. **Participate**. Your students will put the same value on course discussions as you do. If you invest none or very little of your time in the discussion forums, so will they. Your participation can take a variety of forms;
   a. Podcast.
   b. Prod students into talking the discussion further by asking leading questions in the forums. Be careful not to be definitive. If students think you have taken a position they will adopts your s as the "right" one and discussion on the topic will end.
   c. Summary of discussion activity.
   d. Note insightful ideas and acknowledge students who presented them.
   e. Offer extra credit for students willing to resolve a contentious issue brought up in discussion.

5. **Require students to cite** the textbook, assigned readings, and your lectures in their posts and in their responses.
   a. Ideally this forces student to read the course materials thoroughly enough to incorporate them into discussion.

6. **Have students incorporate images or multimedia** into their discussion posts when appropriate.

7. **Use smaller group discussions** as a means of creating more vibrant, focused discussions if the class is large or there are students with very different backgrounds or goals enrolled in your course.

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8. **Remember** that the purpose of the discussion forum is three-fold. First, you are trying to measure comprehension, second, you are trying to elicit engagement with the course materials, and third, you are trying to encourage interaction between your students.

9. **Take an approach to online discussion that is adaptable** to multiple topics and explicitly encourages interaction between students. For example, the approach below can be made more fluid or more directive;
    a. **First** post: Respond to the reading or assigned topic with specific reference to the reading. Include a brief summary, select a specific focus or point, develop that point with explanations and examples, and invite commentary from classmates about a specific part of your post. End with an invitation or question.
    b. **Second** post: Read all the posts in your group then respond to the first post of a classmate who has not yet received a reply. Include specific reference to the main idea of the classmate's post and to the assigned reading or topic, expand on the classmate's ideas with additional information or ideas or offer an alternative viewpoint on the topic and support your position with references to the reading or posts by other group members.
    c. **Third** post: Respond to the person who answered your first post with appreciation for their response and an explanation of ways their message increased your own understanding or stimulated your thinking. Remember your audience is that individual as well as the rest of the class.

10. **Focus on creating and encouraging peer interaction**. Your role is as a facilitator and guide to keep the discussion going in the right direction.
    a. Use student moderated discussion forums as a means of both fostering engagement and encouraging deeper understanding of the course material. If the students have to facilitate the discussion, they have to know the material well enough to do so.
    b. Use student created questions to engage them in the process. This approach forces students to think deeply about the course topics and learn them well enough to create engaging questions.
    c. Both of these techniques also offer the secondary benefit of reducing your workload.