**Whiting School of Engineering**

**Engineering for Professionals**

*Discussions in Online Courses: Best Practices and Expectations*

## Overview

The purpose of using discussions in an online course is to provide opportunities for students to interact with each other, the content, and the instructor. A discussion forum is a communication tool for dialogue in an online course. They can be initiated with a structured post and categorized along a message thread. Like in the face-to-face classroom, discussions can occur between any number of participants who either contribute informally or towards a grade in an online course. Discussions in online courses are primarily asynchronous, and participation is most often virtual.

This document provides details on discussions in online courses at EP, including:

* [Benefits of discussions](#_Benefits_of_Discussions),
* [Best practices and examples for effective discussions](#_Best_Practices_for),
* [Facilitating discussions](#_Facilitating_Discussions),
* [Grading discussions](#_Grading_Discussions),
* [Recommended technologies](#_APPENDIX_B:_Recommended)
* [Top five tips for effective online discussions](#_Top_Five_Tips), and
* [Sample discussion rubric](#_Sample_Discussion_Rubric)

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## Benefits of Discussions

Discussions, when crafted and facilitated well, invoke higher-order thinking. Higher-order thinking skills go beyond basic observation of facts and memorization. They require distinguishing fact from fiction, synthesizing and evaluating information, clearly communicating, solving problems, and discovering truths. In discussion forums with higher-order prompts, the learner is an active processor of information. The learner is broadly engaged in deepening their understanding of the content and elaborating upon and interpreting information.

Discussions are beneficial because they can:

1. Promote interaction between students within a learning community,
2. Supplement content delivery,
3. Offer opportunities to apply knowledge in a practical and meaningful way,
4. Foster collaborative learning that adds a rich dimension to learning,
5. Provide opportunities for in-depth, thoughtful reflection and responses, and
6. Develop analytical skills and critical thinking skills.

## Best Practices for Effective Discussions

The reality is, even with interesting discussion prompts, the same old routine can become tiresome to instructors and students alike. What we want to avoid is for discussions to feel like busywork. Therefore, it's important to understand the best practices that enhance the effectiveness of discussion forums. See Appendix A for tips on how to facilitate discussion forums.

Some best practices follow:

1. **Discussions should be evaluative, creative, and innovative.** For example, instructors may use a discussion forum as a way for students to post and evaluate course projects, products, or presentations. In this way, the discussion forum becomes a mechanism for peer-to-peer evaluation of course products, which is beneficial to the creator and the evaluator. Discussions can also be a way to extend course projects whereby students post deliverables and use a structured commenting method (I.e., 3C+Q) throughout the term (Butcher et al., 2021)**.**
2. **Discussions should model civil and constructive disagreement as a means of intellectual progress.** For example, an instructor may use a discussion forum as a space to debate the ethical issues of software engineering, such as algorithmic bias. Students may be provided different roles or stances through the debate to encourage civil discourse.
3. **Discussions should connect to the learning material and provide a means to apply the learning.** For example, in a data science class, a group discussion can be used to post initial responses to problems, and students peer-evaluate and provide feedback to these responses (Butcher et al., 2021). In this way, the discussion area is relevant to the learning, provides a chance to collaborate, and encourages exploration of ideas.
4. **Discussions should support the learning objectives.** For example, discussions may not need to be a major source of interaction in a course. Other forms of interaction, such as collaborative group work on projects or assignments may better align to the learning objectives. Instructors should consider a variety of strategies to enable high-quality interaction in their course.

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## Facilitating Discussions

There are different expectations based on the roles within discussions in online courses. Students are active participants in the discussions, providing insights on their understanding of the course content and sharing ideas with one another. Instructors provide the parameters for interactions such as deadlines, frequency, and how discussions are evaluated. See Appendix A for tips on how to facilitate discussion forums.

**The focus for instructors is to create opportunities for and encourage the continuation of peer-to-peer interactions.** Instructors are expected to facilitate and guide the discussion in the right direction. A good guideline is that an instructor should foster but not dominate the discussion. Students interact more fluidly when the instructor isn't excessively present (Blackmon, 2012). This approach does not mean that instructors should remove themselves entirely from discussion. Instructor presence is helpful for clarification of ideas and highly correlates to students' motivation to learn, participation, and overall success and retention in the course (Hambacher, Ginn & Slater, 2018; Richardson et al., 2015).

**Instructors are managers of discussions.** Instructors are responsible for managing and guiding the discussions by ensuring that the tone and content is appropriate, and by providing feedback and grading on discussion posts, when appropriate. Discussions are a great place to provide extended learning resources and expand on the course content. Studies have shown that too many discussions in a course may lead to a lack of participation (Blackmon, 2012), so it is important to be judicious in the types and frequency of discussions. See Appendix B for recommended tools to facilitate and manage discussions.

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## Grading Discussions

**Using rubrics to grade discussions.**

Discussion expectations and criteria should be established and communicated to students early in the course. Create a rubric that clarifies both the quantitative and qualitative expectations for student participation in the discussion forums. Rubrics can be simple or complex depending on the discussion criteria.

**Quality and quantity.**

The rubric should include guidance on the quality and length of posts. The quality of students' posts can be determined by evidence of higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking, analysis, the strength of argument, application, and synthesis of concepts. The quantity of posts can be determined by the instructor. The most common method is to require students to post an initial reply followed by one or two responses to peers. To make these responses and replies meaningful, instructors can implement a framework by which students can follow.

**Student interactions.**

Engagement can be graded by the frequency and quality of interactions with classmates and can be enhanced by frameworks such as the 3CQ to help students learn to advance discussions. In the 3C+Q models, the student reply must include a compliment, a comment, a connection (3C), and a question (Q).

See Appendix B for an example of a rubric for grading discussions.

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## Recommended Technologies

[Blackboard discussion forums](https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor/Interact/Discussions)

The discussion tool in Blackboard is a common way to manage and facilitate discussions. Students can post and respond to threads. Instructors can require students to post before seeing other posts. Instructors can easily manage the quality and quantity of discussions and post grades to the gradebook.

[Microsoft Teams](https://support.ep.jhu.edu/hc/en-us/articles/360038087272-Getting-Started-with-Microsoft-Teams)

Microsoft Teams is a collaboration tool that is part of the Office 365 suite of services provided by JHU. Teams enables local and remote students, faculty, and staff to chat and work together in real and near-real time. It is fully integrated with Office 365 as well as native Microsoft Office applications.

With Teams, you get instant access to everything needed for collaboration including content, tools, people, conversations, and built-in access to OneNote, OneDrive, and Microsoft Office apps.

* [Signing Into Microsoft Teams](https://support.ep.jhu.edu/hc/en-us/articles/360038087272-Getting-Started-with-Microsoft-Teams#h_01F2SHQJMXM5Y0ZH389FEGBTN7)
* [Viewing Teams](https://support.ep.jhu.edu/hc/en-us/articles/360038087272-Getting-Started-with-Microsoft-Teams#h_01F2SHQXAH4NW3YNCQWNV56HW8)
* [Creating and Joining Teams](https://support.ep.jhu.edu/hc/en-us/articles/360038087272-Getting-Started-with-Microsoft-Teams#h_01F2SHR3JMKMYPTP0N5RMVBD0T)
* [More Information About Using Teams At Hopkins](https://support.ep.jhu.edu/hc/en-us/articles/360038087272-Getting-Started-with-Microsoft-Teams#h_01F2SJ6X860QW6YJCMRD9TS8N1)

[VoiceThread](https://support.ep.jhu.edu/hc/en-us/articles/360037246011-VoiceThread-Instructor-Guide#GettingStarted)

A VoiceThread is a collaborative, interactive, multimedia slide show that holds images, documents, and videos. It allows people to navigate through the pages and leave comments in different ways: using voice (with a microphone or telephone), text, or video (via a webcam).  VoiceThread has two distinct advantages for classes that are communicating and collaborating across counties, countries, or continents:

1. **VoiceThread is Asynchronous:** That means that users can work on and enjoy VoiceThread presentations at any time—even if their classmates are sleeping across the country. VoiceThread will allow you to play back recorded comments in the order they were left by other, allowing you to watch the entire conversation unfold, in a short amount of time, even if the comments were recorded hours apart.
2. **VoiceThread is Engaging:** Sometimes working with partners or writing responses on a traditional discussion board can be a little dry.  After all, email and discussion boards are nothing more than written text. VoiceThread gives users visual stimulus to talk about and has the distinct advantage of being able to hear one another speak. This makes digital communication through VoiceThread much more personal.

## Top Five Tips for Effective Online Discussions

1. **Offer a model for the ideal discussion post.**
   * Consider using a real student example from a previous term (with permission and name withheld).
   * Provide examples of products if required for the activity.
2. **Incorporate interactivity by requiring variation in students' responses.** 
   * **Jigsaw prompts**: Students are organized into "jigsaw" groups. Each student is assigned content then reorganized into "expert" groups containing one member from each jigsaw group. The "expert" group works together to organize and present information.
   * **Snowball prompts**: Discussions begin in pairs, responding to a discussion question only with a single partner, then join another pair to continue the discussion until the entire class is joined in one large discussion.
   * **3C+Q method**: Each post and response must include a compliment, a comment, a connection (3C) plus a question (Q).
     + Compliment: I appreciate that....
     + Comment: I agree with that… I disagree because....
     + Connection: I also thought....
     + Question: I wonder why....
3. **Provide opportunities for student autonomy.** 
   * Provide students opportunities to moderate the discussions with instructor guidance.
   * Students select one week in which they would like to moderate the discussion.
   * Instructor facilitates for the first few weeks, modeling the role that students would later assume.
   * Provide moderators guidance on best-practice strategies for focusing, maintaining, and extending discussions or use techniques of their choosing.
4. **Create smaller group discussions in classes larger than a dozen.**
   * Group students into subsections of six to eight students.
   * Create a separate but parallel discussion forum for each subsection.
   * Assign each group a unique or conflicting perspective.
5. **Assign students rotating roles and responsibilities within the groups.** 
   * First responder/initiator: initiates the conversation, provides guidelines, facilitates
   * Connector: ensures structure of discussions and connects ideas
   * Synthesizer: summarizes the main points, addresses misconceptions to provide clarity, and highlights concepts that were overlooked in the discussions.

## Sample Discussion Rubric

From 635.483: E-Business: Models, Architecture, Technology, and Infrastructure

### Overview

There are Discussion Questions in every module of the course. Refer to the specific module for instructions regarding each Discussion Question.

You are required to provide a Discussion Question Response and respond to at least two classmates' threads **by the end of each module**. To facilitate this, it is recommended that you post your response to the prompt **by Day 5** of the module to give your classmates enough time to respond to your post by the end of the module.

### Submission

You will submit each discussion by clicking the Module # Discussion located in the specific module. This will then take you to the discussion forum. Each student is expected to create his or her OWN THREAD.

Please use the following for naming the threads: 'lastname.title of post' (your discretion).

You are also expected to respond to other students' threads. While responding to your classmates' discussion points, make sure to analyze and compare their thoughts with yours. It would be a good practice to brainstorm some technical innovations that would be required for the classmate's predictions or vision to come true.

### Plagiarism

Plagiarism is defined as taking the words, ideas, or thoughts of another and representing them as one's own. If you use the ideas of another, provide a complete citation in the source work; if you use the words of another, present the words in the correct quotation notation (indentation or enclosed in quotation marks, as appropriate) and include a complete citation to the source. Discussion Grading Rubric

This rubric assumes the student expresses opinions and ideas in a clear and concise manner, using normal and reasonable spelling and grammar, with minimal error. Posts not meeting this standard will have the grade adjusted downward as appropriate.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Criteria** | **Level of Effort** | | |
| **Relevance/ Understanding** | Contributes little or no new ideas. Shows very little no grasp of the discussion topic. Mostly agrees or asks questions.  0 points | Contributes several new ideas. Postings contain some rehashing or summary of other postings. Seems to grasp discussion.  2 points | Posts offer excellent depth and insight, and some new ideas. Shows an outstanding understanding of the discussion topic.  4 points |
| **Posts** | Posts only to one classmate's thread and does not create own thread.  0 points | Posts only to own thread.  1 point | Posts to at least 2 classmates' threads and creates own thread.  3 points |
| **Timeliness** | Does not make a post or makes one post that is late.  0 points | Only makes one post to the discussion or makes two posts and at least one is late.  1 point | Makes three posts for the discussion or makes four posts and at least one is late.  3 points |

### **Student Role**

* Threads should have unique titles – include your name.
* Post early and often, three or more times for a maximal score – quality and quantity are both important.
* If you are working for an A in the course, then you should aim for a discussion average of 9.
* If you are working for a B in the course, then you should aim for a discussion average of 5.

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| **Points** | **Example Scores** |
| 10 | A truly excellent set of posts in all respects. Students posted early and often with three or more detailed insightful posts, including responses to at least two classmates' threads plus their own, and making a significant and timely contribution to the discussion. |
| 9 | Good, reasonable, timely set of three or more postings, including responses to at least two classmates' threads plus their own. Postings demonstrate some depth an insight and grasp of the topic. This is a very good discussion contribution. |
| 6 | Good, reasonable, timely set of two postings with responses to one classmate's thread, but postings contribute few new ideas: rehashing or summarizing others. May overly rely on questions. A minimal contribution. |
| 3 | Makes two minimal posts in response to another thread. Does not create own thread. |
| 0 | No posting at all to discussion or makes one very minimal posting to a classmate's thread. |

### **Instructor Role**

As stated above in the grading rubric, I will be providing feedback on the quality of your response to the original discussion question. I will not be responding to each post in the discussion forum but please know I am reading and keeping an eye for the direction the discussion is taking. If needed, I may provide some expertise to help guide the discussion.

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