

## How to Host a Successful Online Discussion Forum

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*Are you looking for a way to create a reflection period after class is over or a way to enhance interaction and collaboration? An online discussion gives all students the chance to express themselves because they may not feel comfortable speaking up in class. This document will show you some practical ideas for adding an online discussion forum to your course and some tips for successful discussion facilitation.*

### Prior to the discussion...

#### Pick an activity.

If you're not sure how to implement an online discussion, consider these ideas:

- Virtual field trip or webquest – students are asked to explore different websites (that have been specified by the instructor) and solve a problem or answer a question.
- Brainstorming or concept mapping – students are asked to come up with a list of ideas to solve a problem or identify ways in which concepts relate to one another.
- Problem solving – students are asked to agree upon one solution to solve a problem.
- Case studies – students are given a realistic scenario in which they have to apply a concept they've learned or analyze a situation.
- Debate – students are asked to discuss a topic, disagree with one another about a controversial topic, and/or persuade their peers to adopt his or her point of view.
- Collaborative research/paper writing/project creation – students are asked to work in teams to come up with a presentation, paper, or some other finished product.

#### Create “good” questions.

You need to think carefully about what topics make good discussions. Questions shouldn't be able to be answered by a simple “yes” or “no.” The more open-ended or polarizing a topic is, the more engaged students will be and the better discussion you'll have. There are three types of thinking that are generated by discussion prompts:

- Convergent – you're trying to get students to come to a consensus. *Discussion prompts should start with: Why...?, How...?, In what ways...*
- Divergent – you're trying to get students to think differently and creatively. *Discussion prompts should start with: Imagine..., Suppose..., Predict..., How might..., What are some consequences...*
- Evaluative – you're trying to get students to evaluate different options and pick a stance. *Discussion prompts should start with: Defend..., Judge..., Justify..., What do you think about...?, How do you feel about...?*

### **Set the stage with an announcement.**

The first step toward a successful discussion is letting students know that there is an online forum available for them to participate in. Set the stage by explaining what the topic is, why it's important, and how it relates to their everyday life. It's important to include the dates the forum will be open in the announcement so that students know there is a deadline.

### **Set clear communication guidelines.**

It's important to let students know how often you will be checking the discussion board, responding to questions, and participating in the discussion. You'll need to check in frequently to make sure students are on the right track and to assist with discussion facilitation if students appear to be "stuck."

It's not only important for you to set guidelines for yourself, but it's also important to outline clear expectations with your students for how they should participate in the discussion forum. If you want them to use etiquette or proper grammar, then you need to explain that to them. You also need to explain what constitutes a good forum post (length of post, frequency and timeliness of posts, how many times they need to respond to their colleagues, and how many resources they should cite in their posts). Make sure that students know when the deadline is for posting. They should understand that discussion needs to happen over the whole time period of the assignment (not just the beginning and end).

### **Create a low-stakes forum.**

If this will be your first time using an online discussion, and you will be grading their participation, make sure that you setup a low-stakes forum first. You could have students introduce themselves or could ask what their goals are for this course. This is a non-threatening way to get them to try out the tool before it counts toward their grade.

## **During the discussion...**

### **Have a FAQ area in the forum.**

It's a good idea to have a separate FAQ topic in the discussion forum so that students can ask questions and their peers and instructor can respond. This will save you from answering several different versions of the same question.

### **Schedule time in your calendar to read and participate in the discussion.**

Students welcome your voice into their discussions. They view you as the expert and it's important for them to hear your thoughts regarding different topics. It's also crucial for you to monitor discussions so that you can redirect off-topic conversations. You could also reply privately to students who are struggling or are focusing on the wrong topic.

### **Include participation in grade.**

Students want to make sure the time and effort they're putting into a discussion counts toward their final grades. Even if it's a small portion of the grade, it's a best practice to make participation count.

## **After the discussion...**

### **Give feedback and assign grades**

After the discussion wraps up, you'll want to grade students fairly based on the criteria you outlined before the discussion took place. You'll also want to return your grades and feedback within the timeframe you specified. Remember that the goal of your feedback is to help students know how to perform better during your next discussion. Focus on their strengths to help build confidence.

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Created based on:

Teaching Effectiveness Program. (2013). *Generating and Facilitating Engaging and Effective Online Discussions*. [Handout]. Teaching and Learning Center, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR.