Online Discussions: Tips for Instructors

Online discussions are much like face-to-face discussions: they require preparation and active management in order to facilitate student learning. However, added complexities exist in the online environment, such as getting students comfortable with the conferencing system and helping them to communicate clearly without the aid of nonverbal communication cues. This tips sheet outlines the benefits of online discussions, then provides tips for both planning and facilitating such discussions. Tips to pass on to your students are also included at the end.

Benefits of Online Discussions

- **Student work is high quality**. Because students know that you and their peers will read their postings, they often put significant thought and effort into them. Asynchronous discussion gives students time to consider their postings before making them. The exchange of ideas also often results in higher quality work than if students were left on their own, and the exchanges can be across sections, not just within one tutorial group or small discussion group.

- **Students are better prepared for class**. When the discussion occurs before concepts or issues are discussed in class, students are typically more prepared for the class. They have engaged with the material and each other and have responded to whatever questions or comments you and their peers have posted.

- **Students learn discussion skills**. The optimal online discussion makes students facilitators of their own and others' learning. They should learn how to pose good questions and respond with clarity to help further their understanding and that of their peers. The online format can also greatly benefit shy students who may have difficulty contributing in face-to-face discussions.

- **Students can participate in multiple discussion threads**. The software used to support online discussion allows for multiple subtopics to be under discussion simultaneously. Students cannot complain that they missed their opportunity to add their ideas – a common enough problem in face-to-face discussions.

- **Students practice writing skills**. While most online discussions should be informal, they still give students writing practice. As well, you might ask for the posting of group responses, which should require more formal writing. The iterative nature of discussion, in which ideas are developed and refined as the discussion continues, also models the writing of drafts.

- **Instructors gain insight into students' thinking**. Unfolding discussions, in which students help each other understand course concepts and issues, allow you to learn what students are thinking, uncover the connections they are making, and see the accuracy of their thinking processes, not just the end products.

Integrating Online Discussions into Your Course

- **Connect the discussions to your course objectives**. Like any other teaching strategy, online discussions should not be used as an add-on to a course. You need to carefully consider what course objectives you expect discussions to fulfill and how you will integrate them into your course as a whole. What do you want your students to gain from the discussions? Use your answers as a guide in preparing the online discussion activities.

- **Set early deadlines for postings**. A large part of integrating online discussions into your course is using the ideas generated within them elsewhere in the course (i.e., bring interesting points from the discussion into your next lecture or have students use quotations from their discussion group in an assignment). The integration can only occur when enough time is left between the end of a discussion and the class or assignment. Check the timing of discussions against the timing of other course elements.

- **Use online discussions regularly**. To keep the momentum going, try to have a discussion every 1-2 weeks in your course. This kind of regular schedule will make checking the discussion board a habit for students and help to integrate the activity into the course.

- **Include online discussion participation in the course grade**. If grades are not given for participation, students typically do not use the discussion forum. Decide how much of the course grade to give to discussions and whether you will assess the quantity or quality of postings, or a combination of the two. Harasim (1995) suggests that you assign 10-50% of the course grade for participation, and either give a grade for each week or start at 100 and subtract an amount each week if minimum participation requirements are not met.

- **Make participation requirements explicit**. You cannot expect students to know automatically how to participate constructively in an online discussion. You need to give them clear guidelines and expectations, both for individual and group responsibilities, right from the beginning of the course. Typical individual minimum requirements include: 2-3 logons per week (1 to read question, 1 to make a contribution, and 1 to respond to peers) and 2-4 messages per week, with each message being up to 1-2 screens long (anything longer is hard to read online). Also try to provide time guidelines for each task to help students manage their time appropriately.

Designing Online Discussion Questions/Tasks

- **Use small groups**. To allow for maximal participation, divide your students into small groups of 4-6. The small size makes it easier for all students to participate. Each small group can then post a more formal response to a discussion that is open to the whole class so ideas can be shared amongst all students in the course (this can also reduce your reading time). Be sure to provide instruction on how to work in small groups. To help students be productive discussants and learn about group processes, you

can give them roles to rotate through during the term. Sample roles include: coordinator (keep group focused on the task and equalize participation), time manager (help group meet deadlines), devil's advocate (challenge thinking of others), and relationship monitor (watch tone).

- **Make the questions increasingly challenging and cumulative**. The collaborative nature of online discussions enables students to learn from each other. Ensure that they can truly benefit from participating by using clear, open-ended questions that tap into the higherorder thinking levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Once students have sent in one message, you can move into more challenging discussions. For example, ask them to give concrete examples of how the theories and concepts from the readings or lecture have been observed in their lives, or ask them to write an interactive group essay, with each student adding 1-2 paragraphs to an ongoing paper. You can also have students interpret, analyze, and predict information. Discussion questions need to be interesting, even controversial, and allow for multiple possible answers, examples, or points of view.

- **Consider in advance how students will respond to the discussion questions**. Be ready for divergent directions. You may not be able to prepare for all possible responses, but plan possible follow-up questions to help ensure that your discussion objectives get met.

- **Make discussions a data resource**. To help integrate the discussions into the course and show their value, have students use their discussions as data for an assignment, such as reorganizing the comments made, summarizing or analyzing the main contributions so far, or incorporating their peers' comments as illustrations or examples in an assignment.

- **Decide who will control discussion topics**. You can set all discussion topic areas in advance; however, you may also want to leave room in your schedule for studentgenerated conferences that may emerge during the term. Allowing discussions that stem from your students should increase their motivation and indicate that you value their ideas and input.

- **Signal start and end dates for discussions**. Like a face-to-face discussion, online discussions will eventually die off. You may phase out a discussion gradually, providing reminders a few days before the end of a conference. Keep the contents accessible online in read-only format for a few weeks after it is over, especially if you expect students to use discussion data in assignments or for test preparation.

Orienting Students to Online Discussions

- **Explain the purpose of online discussions**. Very early in the course, let your students know that online discussions are a different yet very productive way of learning, and explain how you will use discussions in your course. Let them know that discussions are about more than exchanging information; they require participants to extend current thinking, introduce alternatives, facilitate new understandings for themselves and their group members – overall, the discussions need to add value to the course. The more students know and understand about your expectations from the outset, the greater their buy-in and participation will be.

- **Start with an easy discussion topic**. To help all students become comfortable with the discussion board, start with a non-graded first "assignment" such as student biographies. You should start off this activity yourself, posting your biography or opening instructions before the students have even logged on. Other possible first assignments include: having students send you a private email about their first impressions of online communication, after having checked your introductory message; having a whole group discussion about what they already know about the course topic area, their objectives for taking the course, and/or their position on an issue and an explanation for it; or having them post an email address and URL pertinent to the course. The point of this first exchange is to ensure that all students can get connected to the conference and know how to send messages.

- **Acknowledge all first responses individually and expediently**. If possible, send a message to individual students, welcoming them to the discussion and making them feel supported. You need to start creating an online community, and just like in a face-to-face meeting, first impressions are very important.

- **Model how to be a productive participant**. Possible ways to do this include: distributing sample questions or interesting threads from previous discussion as examples; helping students make connections to other postings (i.e., "That reminds me of…" or "Look at this thread because it's really relevant"); asking probing questions ("Can you tell us more about…?"); responding to comments that have received no response so to move the discussion forward and acknowledge participants; and using helpful keywords in your posting titles. Periodically remind students to read entire messages, not just skim them; it is challenging to read well onscreen.

- **Model how to give feedback**. Remind students that non-verbal affirmations such as smiles and nodding heads are non-existent in the online environment; instead, discussion participants need to acknowledge others' contributions in writing ("I agree with your point" or "I'm not too clear on your last sentence" or emoticons like .). And when they critique another posting, they should say something positive first and possibly end with suggestions on how to improve, if appropriate.

- **Foster a warm environment**. You may need to help students relax and move past the inherently impersonal nature of computer-based discussions so that they feel part of a group. To do this, you need to be outgoing and positive yourself. Other strategies to help include: letting them know that the discussions are for your course participants only; encouraging an informal, conversational style on contributions that are not formal assignments (i.e., spelling and grammar are not critical); allowing social chitchat to help build relationships; encouraging them to use each other's first names; and labelling disagreement as a learning opportunity.

- **Explain online discussion netiquette**. Because online communication does not include non-verbal messages or tone of voice, readers can easily misinterpret messages. Remind students to avoid sarcasm (it is too easy to misinterpret) and the use of all capital letters (this implies yelling). Consult the Teaching Tip "Netiquette."

- **Consider setting up a "play" conference**. Students who are unfamiliar with the online environment may appreciate having a virtual space in which they can experiment. Offer to delete the contents often so their "mistakes" are not kept.

- **Explain your evolving role as facilitator**. Let students know that you will have a strong presence for the first week or two in the term, but will gradually back out of the discussions, since the point of online discussions is to have students talking to each other. Harasim (1995), Salmon (2000), and Gold (2001) indicate ranges in the ratio of teacherto-student comments of 1:2 to 1:10, with those having the lowest proportions often being most successful. Participate enough to show interest, but let the students dominate. If you interject too much or too soon, you will stifle the discussion and your students will learn to wait for the "definitive" answer from you. After the first week, learn to wait 1-2 days before responding to comments; this should encourage others to respond first. Once the students have taken over, you need to contribute only every few days. Let students know how often to expect you online.

- **Distribute discussion tips**. See the CTE Teaching Tip "Online Discussions: Tips for Students," or design one of your own.

Facilitating Online Discussions

- **Be present.** While you should be posting to the discussion less often as the term progresses, continue to read students' comments and look for emerging patterns and problems, both with the content being discussed and the groups' processes/dynamics. You can then post your observations on these issues or bring them into your classroom. Also feel free to stimulate debate, offer ideas, and offer resources (versus answers).

- **Encourage students to respond to each other.** Just as in a traditional classroom discussion, students need to be reminded to talk to each other directly, not through you as the instructor. Your decreased presence online should help to encourage this. You can also redirect questions and comments from one student to another.

- **Summarize discussions**. Either you or your students need to weave comments together regularly to synthesize the discussion and move it forward. In these comments, you should refer to specific comments made, identify the various points of view, and interpret the main contribution of the discussion. A summary is also an effective way to end a discussion. Several small discussions are more effective than one discussion taken too far.

- **Ensure clear organization of messages**. You may need to move a comment from one discussion conference to another if you have multiple discussions or multiple threads running at once. One way to do this is to copy the message and mail it to its author with an explanation of why you are suggesting a move, then delete it from the conference. This enables the student to easily send the copy to the right conference.

- **Encourage reluctant participants**. You can begin this by commenting on participant silence in the general discussion. If this does not increase participation, you may want to communicate one-on-one

with the student(s) in question. Try to find out what has been causing their limited participation: is it a technical problem or do they lack confidence in their discussion skills? At minimum, praise their efforts and let them know they are not anonymous in your class. Exchange a few emails until they make a comment that you can suggest they forward to the discussion. While this takes a little more of your time, the students will greatly benefit from the attention.

- **Rein in dominant participants**. Again, as with quiet students, consider contacting students who dominate individually to make them aware of the situation and ask them to reflect longer before responding. You could also assign them to be mentors for less vocal students.

Assessing Online Discussions

- **Consider your expectations**. When you start using online discussions, give yourself some time to learn how to be a good facilitator and teach your students how to take over this task. As well, be satisfied if 1-2 key points emerge from each discussion thread. Online discussions will typically serve as one tool within your course, so they cannot accomplish all of your course goals.

- **Categorize discussion postings**. These categories could be used in a rubric to assist with grading. At minimum, they could help you to explain how you derived the participation grades, since students may feel that they were assessed subjectively. The following are three possible categories, from Salmon (2000) and Curtis and Lawson (2001):

Individual thinking

- o Offering ideas or resources and inviting a critique of them
- o Asking challenging questions
- o Articulating, explaining, and supporting positions on issues
- o Exploring and supporting issues by adding explanations and examples
- o Reflecting on and re-evaluating personal opinion

Interactive thinking

- o Critiquing, challenging, discussing and expanding ideas of others
- o Negotiating interpretations, definitions and meanings
- o Summarizing previous contributions
- o Proposing actions based on ideas that have been developed

Group dynamics

- o Acknowledging each others' efforts and contributions
- o Discussing group processes, such as how to make decisions, deal with conflict, and balance participation
- o Advocating increased effort and perseverance among peers

- **Reward quality**. As with a face-to-face discussion, you want to encourage quality contributions that further the thinking of the other participants over sheer quantity, even given minimum participation expectations. Consider giving bonus marks for postings of superb quality.

Resources

- Burge, Z.L. & Muilenburg, L. (2000). Designing discussion questions for online, adult learning. Education Technology, September-October, 53-56.
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- Kelly, R. (ed.) (2001). Building online learning communities. Online Cl@ssroom: Ideas for effective online instruction. October issue, 1-2.
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