Five Tips for Improving Online Discussion Boards

Online discussion boards are here, whether we like them or not. Whether we're teaching completely online or we're adding online discussion to a face-to-face class, online discussion boards are increasingly becoming a staple of college courses.

I've been teaching at the university level for over 30 years; for half of those three decades, I've been teaching, volitionally, online. I've used online discussion boards in classes with as few as 6 students and as many as 130 students; I've used online discussion boards to augment traditional lecture courses and as a mainstay of graduate and undergraduate seminars.

I've probably hosted nearly 50,000 online discussion forums, and I've observed scores of other instructors' online discussion boards, at various institutions including high schools, two-year colleges, liberal arts colleges, and four-year universities. Here are five tips I've gleaned for improving online discussion boards.

1. Divide and Conquer

Although few of us would ever consider holding a face-to-face discussion among 50, much less 100, students, many instructors use only one discussion board for tens or even hundreds of students responding en masse.

I recently observed a colleague teaching an in-person lecture course of 100 students. Prior to each lecture, the instructor posted an online discussion board for students to discuss the reading assignment. But when I observed the online discussion board, I saw few, if any, students actually discussing the reading assignment. Each student was required to post a comment or question, which they did. But none of the students were "talking about (something) with another person or group of people," which is the definition of discussing.

If the pedagogical goal is solely to hold students accountable for a reading assignment, then an online drop box would serve better than an online discussion forum. But if the pedagogical goal is to enable interaction and engagement between and among students about what they read, then you need to divide and conquer.

Divide any class larger than a dozen students into sub-sections of six to nine students. Create a separate, but parallel, discussion board for each subsection of six to nine students. In this way, students can more easily interact with each other, and a class of 90 can feel like a class of nine.

All the online learning management systems (e.g., Moodle, Instructure Canvas, Blackboard) allow dividing students into groups — and automatically generating a unique discussion board for each group. So, workload-wise, it's no more effortful to divide large classes into sub-sections, but engagement-wise, it's considerably more beneficial.

2. Direct Traffic

The most common shortcoming I see among instructors' use of online discussion boards is that the instructors aren't directive enough. Most instructors simply post a prompt and tell all students to respond. The instructors might also tell students to respond to other students.

Hosting effective discussion boards requires directing traffic. You need to specify not only the what (the prompt) but also the who (to respond to) and the when (it's due).

For instance, to make effective the dual assignment of post-your-own comment and respond-to-another student's comment, create two separate assignments, with two separate deadlines: One assignment and its due date is for everyone's initial post; the other assignment and its separate due date is for everyone's responses to other students' initial posts.

Make the due dates for the two assignments at least one day apart. Otherwise, there's no guarantee enough posts will be made, for other students to respond to, until shortly before the first (and only) deadline. There are few things more frustrating to high-achieving students than to post their initial response early and then have to scramble right up to the deadline while waiting for other students to post.

You can be even more directive with regard to whom each student should respond. For some assignments, I require each student to respond to a student to whom no one else has yet responded. For other assignments, I require each student to respond to the same (or conversely, a different) student to whom they responded on their last assignment.

Other variations can be created, but the notion is to direct the discussion board traffic, just like one directs conversational traffic during face-to-face discussions, rather than having the students going in random directions.

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3. Assign Actions

In wording discussion board prompts, rather than simply telling students to "Discuss the ...," or instead of simply asking students, "What did you think about ...?," hinge prompts on action verbs. My favorite action verbs are *Find*, *Explain*, *Describe*, *Identify*, and *Compare*.

For example, one of my favorite prompts for discussing articles or chapters is to "Find three quotes that interested you and explain why." Variations include "Find three quotes that surprised you and explain why" or "Find three quotes that annoyed you and explain why."

Phrasing assignments in terms of actions, such as Find, Compare, Explain, Describe, Identify, and Compare, gives students a sense that the discussion board is a place where real work gets done, rather than a place where everyone sits around to shoot the breeze.

Resist prompts for which only one response is acceptable, because once one student responds correctly, there's nothing more for other students to add. If you want to test retrieval of explicit information, consider using an online quiz or an independently completed worksheet, rather than an online discussion board.

That's not to say that online discussion boards can't query factual information, but the queries need to be varied, which leads me to my next suggestion.

4. Incorporate Student Interactivity

Rather than having all students respond to the same prompt in the same way, incorporate interactivity by requiring variation in students' responses.

For instance, use jigsaw prompts. Named after social psychologist Elliot Aronson's jigsaw classroom, jigsaw prompts require each student to contribute information that hasn't been previously discussed (e.g., Find a ___ that no one else has found; Describe the ___ in a way that no one else has described; Identify a ___ that no one else has identified, and so forth).

Snowball prompts also incorporate interactivity and build in variety. With a snowball prompt, each student is required to build onto the information that a previous student provided. Jigsaw and snowball prompts have the added benefit of rewarding students who post early.

You can also incorporate student interactivity by requiring that students respond to other students using the 3C + Q method. On my online discussion boards, I require that students' responses to other students always include at least two of the following:

- *Compliment* (e.g., "I like how...," "I like that..."),
- *Comment* (e.g., "I agree that... because...," "I disagree that... because..."),
- *Connection* (e.g., "I have also read/seen/heard/thought that..."), and a
- *Question* (e.g., "I wonder why/how/who/what/when/where...")

5. Deter Students from Parachuting into Discussion

Most online discussion assignments are made within a larger learning context, be it a unit, lesson, lecture, or module. Unfortunately, some students try to shortcut performance by parachuting into the discussion board, without having completed the prerequisite activities.

Such shortcutting isn't unique to online discussion; some students show up for face-to-face discussion without completing the prerequisite activities. But one way to deter students from parachuting into an online discussion board is to not place the prompt in the discussion board (i.e., the textbox description). Instead, place the prompt in the larger context of the unit, lesson, or module.

In my classes, I further deter students from parachuting into the discussion board by removing completely the menu item for the discussion board from the course navigation. Instead, I embed links to each Discussion Board forum in my list of assignments (e.g., "Read X, watch Z, and listen to Q, then go to the Unit 2: Assignment #3 Discussion Board and identify a ...").

Thus, with a few modifications, online discussion boards can become more engaging and interactive. They can be a viable complement to in-person classes and a powerful cornerstone of online classes. In fact, many students prefer online discussion to face-to-face discussion, most likely because of the opportunity to communicate asynchronously. I hope these tips will allow many instructors to increase their facility with, if not their preference for, online discussion boards.

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