

Learn@UW - Guidelines for Effective Online Discussions

This resource will help you, as an instructor, to consider the many factors that contribute to successfully integrating online discussion into your course.

Contents

[Variation and incremental development](#)

[Risky assumptions](#)

[Encouraging participation](#)

[Community](#)

[Clear expectations and examples](#)

[Expectations for post content to receive credit](#)

[Expectations for language and style](#)

[Expectations for etiquette](#)

[Training](#)

[Facilitating \(without being the “sage on the stage”\)](#)

[Question types](#)

[To encourage critical thinking](#)

[To encourage a high number of post](#)

[To encourage participation among students without much prior knowledge of a topic](#)

[Answering questions](#)

[Continuity of discussion](#)

[Course integration](#)

[Suggestions for course integration](#)

[A note on learning and assessment](#)

[Discussion board psychology](#)

[Inhibitions?](#)

[Sensitive topics](#)

[Lonely posts](#)

[Works Consulted](#)

Variation and incremental development

Not every suggestion provided in this resource will fit every situation. You'll need to find what works best for your students in the context of your course; an iterative approach will likely be necessary in order to meet your learning goals. Variables like class size and personality, scheduling, pedagogical philosophy and topic might require adjustments. A group with a sense of community established through in-class interaction might seamlessly continue discussions online, while other groups might require more attention.

Risky assumptions

- *Students know how to use a discussion board; they'll make it work.*

Discussion boards have been around for years and so your students have likely participated in one previously. However, you need to frame their participation in your forum with clear expectations and guidelines.

- *I don't want to dominate the discussion (and, frankly, I don't have time to fully participate); I can just suggest a topic and let the discussion evolve organically.*

You'll need to facilitate the discussion with well-crafted questions and, perhaps, with posts of your own. You also need to monitor the discussion and bring it into the face-to-face classroom if appropriate.

- *The discussion board can be an optional supplement to the course in addition to the regular workload.*

Not if you want the students to use it. The discussion board needs to be integrated into the course. You may choose to include discussion participation in student grades. Consider replacing some assignments in your syllabus in order to account for time spent in on-line discussion.

Encouraging participation

Asynchronous online discussions provide more reflection time and a potentially less stressful opportunity for introverted students to share their thoughts. However, these aspects do not guarantee participation. The following items are topics to consider for making your discussion board a positive learning experience.

Community

- Try to develop a relationship between discussion board participants before jumping into class discussions.
- Consider face-to-face encounters or online icebreakers.
- Off topic discussions about favorite free time activities du jour or "getting to know you" posts listing x number of adjectives to describe yourself will start to build a relationship between the students.

- Consider a separate discussion topic for outside dialog (e.g. where students can post announcements of campus events). Any type of "water cooler" social energy can spread to class discussion.
- Large discussion groups can lead to students getting lost or "hiding." Smaller groups (less than 10) lead to a greater sense of accountability and keep students from melting into the woodwork. Depending on your course, it may make sense to have a classwide discussion as well as group discussion areas. For example, make a classwide "water cooler" topic while asking more specific content related questions within the discussion groups.

Clear expectations and examples

Expectations for post content to receive credit

Suggestions:

- Must be at least x number of sentences.
- Can't simply be a question – must include background and explanation.
- No "I agree" or "+1" posts – explain why you agree.
- Provide an example of a "good" post (from previous student – if you have permission from the student – or one of your own).
- Use action verbs in the discussion prompt such as *Find*, *Compare*, *Explain*, *Describe*, and *Identify*. For example, "Find three quotes that interested you and explain why."
- Build interactivity into the discussion prompt such as "Find a ___ that no one else has found," or "Describe the ___ in a way that no one else has described it."

Expectations for language and style

- Text speak or traditional grammar?

Your choice of traditional composition guidelines or acronyms, abbreviations, and smiley faces will depend on your goals and purposes. You set up the guidelines. Do you want to provide a forum for an informal exchange of ideas? Or do you want to demonstrate to your students that the Internet can be a space for academic discourse? Some potential guidelines include

- Inter-post referencing guide.
- Full quote of post or pertinent section of a post.
- Refer to post number.
- Any abbreviations that you'll include: OP, ^^^, etc.

Expectations for etiquette

- Establish requirements for respectful and helpful attitudes in interactions.
- If relating stories about yourself or people you know (depends on subject matter), be mindful of protecting the anonymity of others.

Training

Make sure your students know how to access the discussion and know what to do when they have arrived.

- Walk through the process in class, or create a screencast.
- Provide instructions on-line and/or as a hand out.

For more tips specific to completely online discussion check out [these 5 rules](#) for creating engaging online discussions

Facilitating (without being the “sage on the stage”)

Students often like to see lively participation from the instructor; students evaluate those instructors as enthusiastic and adept at demonstrating their expertise. However, instructor posts can also stifle discussion. By observation, most instructors answer questions -- with what is perceived as the "definitive" answer -- instead of opening up more discussion with Socratic questions of their own or proposing parallel topics of inquiry. Here are some tips for facilitating discussion without dominating a forum:

Question types

To encourage critical thinking

- Craft questions that invite reflection, not a single, factual answer.
- In a topic header or introductory question, provide enough information to help your students think through either deep and focused answers or broad and synthesizing answers (depending on your goals). Encourage them to bring in prior knowledge or outside sources in order to foster more complex thinking/synthesis.

To encourage a high number of post

- Ask opinion questions. Encourage your students to explain/support their opinions thoroughly. Students that post their thoughts and then solicit the opinions of others will enrich a discussion.
- Include a goal with each discussion question, e.g. "generate as many reasons as possible," "generate counter-arguments," or "generate rebuttals."
(Note: these prompts typically work well for students with high familiarity with the topic, but may overload students without much prior familiarity.)

To encourage participation among students without much prior knowledge of a topic

- Elaborated questions, i.e. a question followed by a few possible responses to explore
- Provide a guide of question/comment types:
 - Clarification: ask for verification or additional information.
 - Probing assumptions: ask for explanation or reliability of assumptions.
 - Examples: ask for demonstrations of a poster's reasoning process.
 - Viewpoints: ask for and/or present possible alternative viewpoints.
 - Implications: ask for and/or present possible consequences of a poster's reasoning process.

Answering questions

- Encourage students to reply to each other's questions instead of expecting you to swoop in with the perfect answer. (Replying may be part of the assignment.) This technique proves particularly effective for any topics you have already covered in class.
- When you do answer a question, remind the student(s) of a class discussion, indicate a selection in a text, or point out a website that provides relevant information. Ask the student(s) to report back.
- Consider establishing an FAQ section for questions about participation expectations.
- Consider establishing a separate section for questions about course admin.

Continuity of discussion

- Thoughtful facilitation of the discussion board may include in-class discussion of topics brought up online.
- If a discussion stagnates, you may need to plant another question or begin a new thread. Stagnation may also occur in situations where students don't feel like they know enough to contribute to the discussion. See "Question types" section, above, for hints in this regard.
- If a discussion thread migrates to a new topic, you may wish to start a new discussion thread that's more appropriately labeled for it.
- Nip any friction in the bud. Remind them of your courtesy expectations (perhaps in a separate email or face-to-face), and continue the discussion. Any egregious displays of disrespect may warrant a deleted post.
- A fortunate characteristic of asynchronous communication is that you don't have to make facilitation decisions immediately. Take your time to think about a way to intervene that's effective for meeting the learning goals for the activity. But do consider that if a post goes more than 24 hours without a reply, everyone may move on (through observation, you will be able to judge your discussion board's culture in this regard).
- Students, too, can facilitate a discussion. Just as you might contact a particularly thoughtful and tactful student outside of class to ask him/her to be willing to partner up with a student or group in class, you may ask a few students to help keep discussions flowing by incorporating some of these techniques.

Course integration

For face-to-face or blended courses an online discussion will ideally augment time spent in the classroom and vice versa; this result relies on deft integration on the part of the instructor.

Make efforts to integrate the online portion into the face-to-face classroom so that students do not disregard the discussion board or, conversely, participate solely online with little effort in the classroom.

Suggestions for course integration

- Use the discussion board as a source for in-class lecture/discussion topics. Mine the discussion for intriguing topics and for concepts that aren't clear.
- Make participation in online discussion part of student grades.

- Consider replacing some assignments in your syllabus in order to account for time spent in on-line discussion.

A note on learning and assessment

For assessment purposes, number of posts or comments is a typical measure for participation because it is easy to quantify. However, reading and reflection may contribute just as much to student learning in online discussions. Those students that focus on posting messages to meet a requirement, rather than reading messages, lose the benefit of shared knowledge building through the online discussion. Most online discussion boards allow the instructor to see how many posts a student has read or accessed.

Discussion board psychology

Inhibitions?

Some people will say and do things online that they wouldn't otherwise do in person. Perhaps they'll relax and express themselves more openly, or perhaps they'll be rude and dismissive. Hopefully you'll find that the students feel free to express opinions and ask questions they wouldn't in class. Any excessive and unconstructive negativity should be addressed immediately. Additionally, most discussion tools allow for anonymous posts, or posts that are anonymous to everyone but the instructor. This might be a good way to encourage students to post thoughts they might otherwise hold back.

Sensitive topics

If discussing touchy subjects and students feel hesitant to share an opinion or are in any way uncomfortable – you could recommend to them to sit on a post. Type it out and wait (an hour? a day?). Come back to it, read it again, and see if you want to post, modify, or delete.

Lonely posts

If you notice that a post receives no replies (especially if you know it is a quiet student or one that is otherwise sticking his/her neck out a bit), you may wish to reply yourself after you've given time to other students first.

It might be more effective, however, to recruit a student or two to do so (just as you might ask a particular student to pair up with another in class on group assignments.)

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[Topics Map](#) > [Discussion](#)