



University of Birmingham

Whether face-to-face or online, discussions can provide valuable forums in which complex content and perspectives are examined and understood through collaborative processes and knowledge sharing.

Discussion can take many forms: EBL, PBL, debates, small group work, and case studies, for example.

Whenever tutors encourage and allow students to play more active roles in or to assume more responsibility for class activities, it is important to provide models and/or guidelines. Norms or expectations for behaviour can be suggested by the tutor, or developed in collaborative effort with the students.

Don't try to do everything at once. Stretch yourself, but maintain a comfort level. First, start the journey of online discussion and go a little further each semester until you are where you want to be.

Defining Student Roles

Many tutors report that keeping up with online discussions takes up too much of their time. This would certainly be true if they did all of the work, from designing the discussion prompts, to monitoring and responding to all student postings, to summarizing and drawing conclusions, to bringing pertinent comments from the online discussion into class, to evaluating and marking student contributions.

While you, as an tutor, are responsible for designing the learning environment and might want to be involved in all of these activities at some points in your programme or module, you do not have to be responsible for all of them all of the time. **Students can help!**

Once the tutor states the learning outcomes and the learning tasks / activities, many roles for students can be established. Students can

- facilitate online discussions
- propose online discussion questions and topics
- summarize or analyze a discussion and present in class
- take on roles relating to content management / building, participation, community management,

Increasing student involvement in the development of the learning process can increase motivation, (individual and group) independence and participation. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. Once you challenge yourself to think about ways to involve students - ways to have them take on roles and responsibilities in online discussions, you'll create exciting ways to involve students so they understand.

Setting Expectations

It is important that the tutor decides what student roles are appropriate to their own situation. It is recommended that

- students are assigned a role along with accompanying clear job responsibilities.
- the tutor's role within this situation and any additional staff that maybe involved are defined
- the collective role of all group members is clarified (ie. to participate in the discussion / research / project)

Where you can, you should pre-assign the roles – this saves valuable time and can reduce anxiety amongst the group. If you have two or more scheduled activities / tasks, then consider rotating these roles amongst the group members. In this way students have the opportunity to explore and develop their core transferable skills. Don't forget to provide the students with a schedule (during an induction period) of when they are expected to take on specific roles.

EBL Task 1 (Week 2-4)

Bob Jones:	Chairperson
Janet Hughes:	Recorder
Ellie Bannerman:	Summariser
Andrew Mare:	Time Keeper
Trevor Crossley:	Reporter

EBL Task 2 (Week 5-7)

Bob Jones:	Time Keeper
Janet Hughes:	Reporter
Ellie Bannerman:	Chairperson
Andrew Mare:	Recorder
Trevor Crossley:	Summariser

There are enough roles for one per person in small groups (4-6). You may decide in some circumstances to assign just two roles, like a chairperson and summariser.

Give Me an Example

You have a **postgraduate** module cohort which you have subdivided into groups of 6. After consideration it is decided to utilise and scaffold the non-contact hours (part of the 200 hours of student effort). At the conclusion of a f2f session, students are set a group based online discussion topic. Two people per group are assigned specific roles (chairperson and summariser). The groups have until the following week's session to discuss the topic on their WebCT bulletin board.

After the success of the online discussion with the post grad cohort, it is decided to build in some EBL activities with an **undergraduate** module cohort as well. In addition to f2f contact, students are required to work on group tasks which are based around authentic real-world problems. Groups are given three weeks to independently work on their task, regularly posting evidence of their working on their Wiki. Each student is assigned a role which changes for each task.

During each of these situations the tutor monitors the activities and provides feedback during and at the end as appropriate and agreed with the students.

Functional / Project Roles

Watson (2000); Pilkington & Kumnek (2004)

- Chairperson / Leader
- Recorder / Secretary
- Summariser
- Accuracy Coach / Checker
- Time Keeper
- Reporter / Spokesperson / Webmaster
- Enquiry Checker

Conversation Roles

Brookfield & Preskill (1999); Pilkington & Kumnek (2004)

- Problem, Dilemma, or Theme Poser
- Reflective Analyst
- Scrounger
- Devil's Advocate / Opinion Challenger
- Detective
- Theme Spotter
- Umpire
- Focuser (Textual or Conversation)
- Balancer (of participation)
- Netiquette Enforcer
- Response Checker
- Welcomer
- Motivator

Adapted by Danielle Hinton, School of Education from the University of Calgary ITBL Series which is © and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5>

Where Can I Go for More Information?

- **Discussion as a Way of Teaching**
Brookfield, S and Preskill, S (1999), Buckingham : Open University Press, p. 91.
http://stephenbrookfield.com/pdf_files/Critical_Thinking_materials.pdf
- **Using role-play activity with synchronous CMC**
Pilkington, R and Kumnek, P (2004) in ICT for Curriculum Enhancement, Monteith, M (ed.), Bristol : Intellect Books
- **The Power of Problem Based Learning**
Duch, B., Groh, S. and Allen, D. (eds.) Sterling, VA : Stylus Publishing, pp. 59-68.
- **Silicon, Circuits and the Digital revolution**
Watson, G. (2000) University of Delaware, <http://www.physics.udel.edu/~watson/scen103/collog2000/question1.html>

Note: See resources above for detailed job descriptions.