

Preparing Students to Participate in eDiscussions

Talking About... Learning & Teaching



University of Birmingham

Utilizing an online discussion board can deepen student learning and extend dialogue about core course concepts. Creating and facilitating effective online discussions requires just a bit of preparation and a few proven strategies. Motivating students to participate in online discussions is at the core of many frequently asked questions.

Clear Purpose

Be clear about your purpose, first in your own mind and then in your instructions to students. It is a very rare cohort (perhaps CPD) that will engage in voluntary discussion.

- Clearly note how the discussions form part of their attendance and participation contract in just the same way as lecture, seminar and workshop attendance is not optional
- If the dialogue is a required part of or feeds into an assignment, make it clear how students will be evaluated.
- Always give students guidance in the form of reflective prompts or a structure you want them to use or the choice of two or three questions you want them to answer.
- If the forum requires students to interact with each other and read and respond to other ideas, be specific on what you expect of them.

Model Participation

Where possible model participation in an online discussion with some simple ice-breaker style activities (using Post-It notes)....



Explicit Expectations

Make your expectations explicit, to the extent that you have quality or quantity standards in mind.

- **Be clear about length of a post** (*one or two sentences to postcard sized*).
- **Deadlines should be clearly outlined** (*by noon on Tuesday, before the next session*).
- **Indicate how many postings students should read and reply to** (*post 2 original, read all other posts and select two that are the most like/unlike yours to respond to*).
- **Define what constitutes an acceptable response** (*one that identifies points from the text to support arguments, one that contributes a new line of thinking or a challenging question*).
- **Indicate how often students should try to logon** (*little and often, at least 3-4 times per week*).
- **Signal the length of suggested time spent on each online session** (*We suggest that you spend approx 10-15 minutes online each time you log on*).
- **Students should be aware of the timetable and their individual roles** (*Assigning roles such as Chair, Summariser etc are an important management mechanism*).
- **Suggest the amount of time that should be spend engaging per period of task time** (*2-3 hours per EBL Task Memo ie every two weeks. This includes your time spent online (reading and responding to messages) as well as task related workload (research, synthesising and reporting)*).
- **Remind them to pace themselves the course of each task.**

Give Me an Example

Post two or three questions on the discussion board, each in a separate forum and ask students to respond to each question. Then ask students to select at least one discussion forum, read ten posts from fellow students, and respond to three of them. You can then browse all forums and read or skim a number of postings in each forum, making note of key points made, questions raised and misconceptions revealed. Then send a class email with written reactions and comments. Alternatively, you can use the first fifteen minutes of the next class to discuss selected themes and issues from these notes.

Sample discussion questions:

- What do you see as the two key points made in the lecture and how do they relate to your own experience?
- What question lingers in your mind after the lecture?
- If you had to prioritize the three main points of the lecture, how would you rank them in terms of importance and why?
- What information or concept from the lecture helped you the most in terms of what you need to gain from this class? Explain.
- Select one of the lecture points and offer an alternative perspective in two or three sentences.

More Ideas

- Create a friendly, social environment in which learning is promoted.
- Make the activity interesting. Post challenging questions relevant to module activities.
- Require participation and include the online discussion in a participation grade.
- Use various learning options to stimulate learner participation and interaction. Activities to encourage participation include small group discussion, debates, polling activities, peer review, case studies and one-on-one message exchanges that recognize students' messages.
- Form learning teams or small groups that work together in a discussion forum.
- Require a hand-in assignment. Students can individually (or in small groups) submit a summary of or reflection on the posts in a particular discussion.
- Use peer grading or peer-feedback as part of the discussion experience.
- Model ways to support arguments in your own postings. Cite research studies or theories to back up your comments.
- Make the material relevant to students' lives. Develop questions and activities for learners that relate to the student experiences.
- Invite visiting experts to add to the discussion. Guest experts may join the conference to respond to posted contributions from students or to answer questions.
- Do not underestimate your impact as a model - demonstrate your enthusiasm for their exchange of ideas.

Adapted Danielle Hinton 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: Tools and Techniques for University Teachers**
Brookfield, S.D. & Preskill, S. (1999). Buckingham : Open University Press.
- **The Role of the Instructor/Facilitator**
Derived from Berge, Z.L. (1995). Facilitating Computer Conferencing: Recommendations from the Field. *Educational Technology*, 35(1), 22-30.
http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/teach_online.html
- **Eight Ways to Get Students More Engaged in Online Conferencing**
Blackboard (2003)
http://www.elearning.uq.edu.au/downloads/BbEightWaySConferencing_TipSheet.pdf
- **Your College E-Learning Team**