Reasons For Online Discussions

Talking About... Learning & Teaching

University of Birmingham

The online discussion board tool is often one of the first features that many tutors try to use. You may, however, find that your first experience using the discussion board falls short of what you had hoped for.

It is first important to understand why discussion is a good teaching strategy and know what outcomes you can expect from a discussion.

When instituting discussions online, it is also important to plan upfront and make online dialogue relevant to module content.

Why Discussions?

Research and experience tell us that students retain more information and are better prepared to apply concepts if they are actively engaged with course material. Discussions are one way to help students become more involved in the classroom. When designed effectively, discussions allow students to talk about, question, restate and interact with course content and the perspectives of others students. This dialogue complements and builds on the lecture and textbook content.

- Teaching by discussion is an extremely effective means of helping students apply abstract ideas and think critically about what they are learning. (*The Penn State ID* newsletter, December 1992)

- Discussion helps students find their own voices and develop their own understanding of the subject matter. (Brookfield and Preskill 1999)

- When the purpose of a class is to develop problem-solving skills and abilities, the least efficient discussion is superior to most lectures. (Bloom 1953, as referenced in *The Penn State ID* newsletter)

Why Use Online Discussions if I Can Meet with Students Face-to-Face?

While we tend to think of discussions as face-to-face activities, online discussions provide benefits sometimes not available in the classroom. For example:

- Tutors who have used the online format frequently report that more students are able to participate in online forums than in large group classroom discussions.
- Allows the tutor to utilize the Time Out of Class (TOC) to ensure that students to preparatory readings etc.
- Students who do not volunteer in class often become "vocal" during online discussions.
- Online interaction allows for further discussion of a topic. It also provides students with "think time" to reflect on module material and post more thought-out comments to the discussion board.
- Students and tutors often think of comments or questions after the lecture and can post them and discuss these inquiries online.
- The online environment lets you easily create small discussion groups within a large cohort.
- The online format is a convenient way to archive and preserve your module discussions.
- Online discussions can give you feedback prior to or after a session; this feedback may indicate what content students understand and what requires further clarification.

Give Me an Example

If your module textbook/lecture provides questions at the end of a chapter or section, you can post selected items to the online discussion board for students to respond to. Each week, you can assign a different set of two or three students to facilitate the online discussion and report the results of the dialogue to you or to the cohort as a whole. This format is particularly valuable to use in advance of a lecture. The online discussion will help you gain valuable insights into what students have learned and what they still have questions about. You can adjust your focus during lectures to spend less time on the points that most students seem to grasp well and expand on explanations in areas where students appear confused. It's a good idea to actively facilitate and monitor the first online discussion so as to serve as a model for student facilitators. It is also a good idea to provide a list of expectations to the facilitator students. The list might include suggestions that students:

- Check the discussion at least once a day
- Respond to all substantive posts by pointing out good points
- In a respectful manner, challenge a point made
- Ask a question to provoke deeper thinking or more explanation
- Ask students to respond to or compare and contrast their response

More Ideas

- Discussion forums in WebCT can also be used for interactions like debates and feedback sessions, EBL/PBL, Small group work or dyadic learning partnership exchanges.
- Guest experts (including international) may join the discussion area with students to respond to posted contributions or answer questions.
- A discussion that begins in a F2F session can be continued online.
- Small groups can discuss cases and summarize their discussions prior to class and then present the summaries in session.

Other Considerations

- Be sure that the discussion activity is relevant to your course objectives and relates to students' learning experiences.
- Bring the online discussion into F2F session or module materials.
- Be clear about the discussion questions, time period of the discussion and the expectations of all the students.
- Take students' time into account – set expectations up front. Consider how much time students need to spend on the discussion and provide guidelines (ie. Logon 3 times minimum / regularly, should post minimum of 2 original and 3 reply messages).
- Take your own time into account - plan. Set expectations with the students of how much time you will spend monitoring and what type of feedback they should expect from you as tutor.
- Give clear explanations on if and how students' participation in discussions will be evaluated (formative vs summative, group vs individual).
- Use students to facilitate and summarize online discussions (once you have modeled such facilitation) – assign individual roles to students.

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.

- **Using Discussion in the Classroom**
  PennState
  http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/Tools/Discuss/

- **Engaging Students in Discussion Online**
  University of Washington
  http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/Bulletin/OnlineDiscussion.html

- **Taking Discussion Online**
  Dartmouth College Web site.
  http://www.dartmouth.edu/~webteach/articles/discussion.html

- **Your College E-Learning Team**