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Facilitating Online Discussions

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The context for this article is asynchronous online discussion that supplements in-person class activities.

Why Supplement Class with Online Discussion?

Why have online discussions? All types of discussion can help students meet course outcomes that require critical thinking, through "co-construction of knowledge" (explaining their understanding in their own words, drawing on their own experience, and defending their understanding of course concepts in the face of other students' (and sometimes the professor's) understanding).

Online discussion has some unique traits that may be useful to your students. Being able to participate anytime means students can do so when they are ready, and have had time to think about the topic after class and prepare their post. And, having a permanent record of everything that has been posted makes it possible to have "reflection" assignments that make use of discussion postings. This helps make up for the downsides of online discussion, such as the fact that it is time consuming to type everything that you normally just say, and that keeping track of discussion flow can be disjointed as you navigate through large amounts of text and numbers of postings.

Research-based Good Practices

The example discussion expectations below bases the participation and evaluation criteria on research. The example evaluation rubric that follows them is based on the criteria listed in the example. The use of evaluation rubrics for discussion participation is a research-based effective practice, discussed in the "Other Tips" section below. Both the expectations and rubric have been used in UNB courses.

Example Discussion Participation Expectations

It is important that you participate in the discussion activity in meaningful ways, engaging with both the content and each other. It is not a matter of quantity of discussion thread comments but rather the quality. As a general rule, contribute to each of the two weekly topics on three different days. Opinions or shared experiences, while welcome, must be explicitly tied to key points in the assigned readings. At least one post in each topic should be a thoughtful reaction to another student's post.

While it is difficult to specify the ideal length for a discussion posting, given differences in personal writing style, the subject at hand, the use of formatting such as lists, etc., a concise paragraph or two that meets the criteria listed below would be typical. However, this not a size minimum or maximum.

Follow these discussion post criteria (Muilenburg 109):

- Answer all portions of the posted question(s)
- Clearly state the main idea of the point you are making
- Include supporting detail for the main idea

- Quote or paraphrase portions of the text or lecture to support main ideas and include reference or URL of the Web site
- Where appropriate, relate material in the current unit to previous unit content (e.g., lecture, discussion, and literature)
- Use proper grammar and correct spelling.

An example discussion evaluation rubric:

Online Discussion Evaluation Rubric				
Criteria	**1 Below expectations**	**2 Meets threshold of expectations**	**3 Meets expectation level target**	**4 Exceeds expectations**
Volume of contribution	Fewer than 3 posts	3 posts, on different days, one of which is a response to another posting	3 posts, on different days, that meet Muilenburg's criteria	More than 3 posts, all of which meet Muilenburg's criteria, that give fresh insight in each post, and initiate thoughtful responses from others
Critical analysis (Understanding of Readings and Outside References)	Discussion postings show little or no evidence that readings were completed or understood. Postings are largely personal opinions or feelings, or "I agree" or "Great idea," without supporting statements from the readings, outside resources, relevant research, or specific real-life application.	Discussion postings repeat and summarize basic, correct information, and link readings to outside references, relevant research or specific real-life application, but more depth would improve them. Inclusion of alternative perspectives or connections between ideas is attempted.	Discussion postings display an understanding of the required readings and underlying concepts, including correct use of terminology. Points are supported by references to evidence in the assigned readings. Student draws on knowledge and experience. Alternative perspectives are mentioned in a balanced way.	Discussion postings display an excellent understanding of the required readings and underlying concepts including correct use of terminology. Postings integrate outside resources or relevant research or specific real-life applications (e.g., work experience, prior coursework) to support important points. Quotes are well-edited and referenced appropriately.
Spelling and grammar	Uses poor spelling and grammar in most posts; posts appear "hasty"	Errors in spelling and grammar evidenced in several posts	Few grammatical or spelling errors	Written responses are free of grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors. The style of writing facilitates communication.
Expression Within the Post	Does not express opinions or ideas clearly; little apparent connection to topic, little reference to other students' posts	Provides clear expression of opinions or ideas with reference to readings; represents other students' posts fairly	All opinions and ideas are stated clearly and succinctly with each one supported by evidence; several connections to other students' posts, each	Expresses opinions and ideas in a clear and concise manner with obvious and consistent connection to evidence and other students' posts, all represented fairly.

Online Discussion Evaluation Rubric				
Criteria	**1 Below expectations**	**2 Meets threshold of expectations**	**3 Meets expectation level target**	**4 Exceeds expectations**
			represented fairly.	
Contribution Class Learning	Discussion postings do not contribute to ongoing conversations or respond to peers' postings. There is no evidence of replies to questions or comments or as new related questions or comments. Discussion postings are at midpoint or later in the week or contributions are only posted on the last day.	Discussion postings sometimes contribute to ongoing conversations by: • Affirming statements or references to relevant research, or • Asking related questions, or • Making an oppositional statement supported by any personal experience or related research/evidence.	Discussion postings consistently contribute to the class' ongoing conversations by: • Affirming statements or references to relevant research, or • Asking related questions, or • Making an oppositional statement supported by any personal experience or related research/evidence.	Discussion postings actively stimulate and sustain further discussion by building on peers' responses, including: • Building a focused argument around a specific issue, or • Asking a new related question, or • Making an oppositional statement supported by personal experience or related research.
Etiquette in Dialogue with Peers and Instructor	Postings show disrespect for the viewpoints of others.	Some postings show respect and interest in the viewpoints of others, and none show disrespect.	Postings show respect and interest in the viewpoints of others. Posts connect with the flow of online conversation by others, and show respect and sensitivity to peers' gender, cultural and linguistic background, political and religious beliefs.	All posts show respect and sensitivity to peers' gender, cultural and linguistic background, political and religious beliefs, and there are many instances of these. Posts connect well with the flow of other posts, and often initiate helpful discussion on the part of others that leads to helpful insights.

Other Tips

Typical ways of initiating discussion are to ask a question, use a common experience (e.g., video, scenario, example), introduce a controversial issue, or list specific concerns (Muilenburg, 107).

Convergent Thinking	Divergent Thinking	Evaluative Thinking
Often begins with: • Why • How • In what ways...	Often begins with: • Imagine • Suppose • Predict... • If..., then... • How might... • Can you create... • What are some possible consequences...	Often begins with these words or phrases: • Defend • Judge • Justify... • What is your opinion about...
Examples: • How does gravity differ from electrostatic attraction? • How was the Federal Gov't's infrastructure spending program after the 2008 market crash an application of Keynesian Economics? • Why was Richard III considered an evil king?	Examples: • Suppose that Caesar never returned to Rome from Gaul. Would the Empire have existed? • Will computer intelligence ever surpass human intelligence? • How might life in the year 2100 differ from today? • If solar energy could be cheaply harvested and stored for future use, how quickly would it be adopted?	Examples: • Is climate change scientifically proven? • If UNB funds a men's hockey team, is it gender discrimination if it does not also fund a women's hockey team? • How do you feel about lowering the voting age to 16? Why?

(Adapted from Discussion Board, 5)

In addition to the organizational role (setting the agenda, making links to objectives explicit, posting online discussion procedures), instructors have a social role: reinforcing good participation behaviour by posting messages that are welcoming and providing feedback that encourages participants.

Use the first discussion as a pilot test. Conduct formative evaluation early and often (Muilenberg, 109).

Facilitators should strive to help students improve their quality of analysis, argumentation, counter-argumentation, and presentation of supporting evidence, rather than just opining (Correia, 60). They can encourage a high level of discussion quality by asking questions, summarizing key points, and nurturing intellectual inquiry.

Correia also suggests these tips, which are not exclusive to the online world (Correia, 60):

- Get to know your students

- Organize and structure information effectively for online scanning and reading (online, people scan topic sentences to find ones of interest, then look a statement of the main point, then look for supporting details)
- Use good computer-based communication strategies (concise, main point first, each sentence on its own (or very short paragraphs that are on one point only), bullet points)
- Establish your credibility by demonstrating your knowledge of the topics
- Show the connection between discussion topics and real-life practice
- Support honest and open exchange of ideas while being respectful, by posting protocols and using evaluation rubrics, as well as being a good example
- Create a friendly online environment that is safe for substantive conversation, even when controversial topics are explored
- Encourage and support social interaction
- Encourage students to reveal challenges and provide real help and encouragement when they do
- Motivate participation by explicitly valuing every contribution

Discussions should be linked to course content and activities. Otherwise they're seen as "spare time" activities that students rarely find time to complete. Create discussion topics related directly to student needs and/or professional practice. Incorporating students' prior knowledge and work/life experience increases discussion interaction (Correia, 64).

Other Relevant Research Findings

Gilbert's research into online asynchronous discussion practices that encouraged meaningful dialog found that "…the addition of online discussion evaluation rubrics, in particular, the even distribution of postings' requirement [requiring students to post throughout the week rather than on one day] and the increase in the overall grade percentage [allotted to discussion activities], positively influenced meaningful discourse in asynchronous online discussions" (Gilbert, 16). "Meaningful discussion" was described as students explaining what they know to others, taking positions and defending them, analyzing their performance and comparing it to experts and peers, relating new knowledge to what they already know and have experienced, synthesizing others' experiences and viewpoints. Among the traits of meaningful dialogue that was measured was students ability to make inferences by generalizing their understanding and applying it to other contexts.

Evaluation rubrics and facilitator guidelines improved meaningful discourse, whereas protocols setting size limits and requiring citations in proper format from readings detracted from it (Gilbert, 16). The latter "…may have inhibited students from making inferences (MI) because students may have been more concerned with citing the reading and clarifying their understanding of the course content than with constructing their own understanding of the content by making inferences" (Gilbert, 15).

Keep in mind that Gilbert's research subjects were adult graduate Education students taking a course in the fundamentals of instructional design and technology in online learning. Correia's tips are also based on research involving K-12 teachers taking a graduate-level Education course.

Student-led Online Discussion

Both Gilbert and Correia used student-facilitated discussions as well as instructor-led ones. The former seems to be a particularly effective practice for graduate-level students, and probably third and fourth year undergraduates. Correia found that peer-led small group asynchronous discussions were the most effective. Students felt more connected and were more motivated to participate, and it built a strong sense of community. When small group discussion was led by instructors, discussion is treated as short essay assignment rather than a discussion. With large group discussion led by the instructor, students all answered the same way, as if it was a test. The only motivation for participating in the latter setting was that it was mandatory (Correia, 61).

Student facilitators require coaching—online discussion facilitation skills rarely come automatically. Provide guidelines on the facilitation roles and responsibilities, including setting up the discussion agenda, clarifying the purpose, encouraging participation, asking leading questions to guide the discussion, keeping the discussion focused, encouraging the sharing of many views, and summarizing the discussion highlights periodically. Student facilitators should be encouraged as well to try out their ideas for generating authentic dialogue (Correia, 63).

A holistic discussion facilitation evaluation rubric as an indicator of effective discussion facilitation by students is offered below.

Criteria	Performance Indicators	Mark
Question setup	Initial question was: • Directly related to a key concept or principle in the reading • Thought provoking • Phrased to invite discussion or debate	___/5
Monitoring	Discussion was monitored sufficiently—checked each day, sufficient facilitator posts to keep the discussion flowing. There was effective intervention to pick up discussion when it flagged.	___/5
Facilitation	Facilitated well: affirmed good points others made, clarified misunderstandings, brought in additional information from the readings and experience to keep discussion on topic. Responded appropriately: remained impartial but engaged, answered respectfully and professionally, showed personality without conflicting with other participants.	___/10
Clarity	Clearly stated the main points being made. Included supporting detail for main ideas. Grammar was correct, word use was at an appropriate level, and spelling was correct.	___/5
Balance	Postings drew on personal experience to support or extend key points from the readings and did not overshadow those points.	___/5

Discussion-based Reflective Assignments

As indicated at the outset, online discussions have the advantage of leaving a written record of the discussion, the upside that helps make up for the time used in typing everything you would normally

say. This persistent record can be a source of "lessons learned" reflective assignments. For example, students could be asked to:

- Find your first post on a major course topic. If you were writing this post now, what would you change and keep the same? Why? How and why has your understanding of this topic changed?
- Review the course discussion on a major course topic. Show how your opinion on (or understanding of) the topic has developed throughout the class discussions, providing evidence from your posts. Show how points raised by others affected your opinion (or understanding, as the case may be).
- Review the course discussions and show the full range of class opinion on topic X. Include a brief rationale for each from the point of view of those holding those views. Critique them from your point of view.

References:

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