

Evaluating or Marking Online Discussion Participation

Online discussions can provide valuable forums where complex content and perspectives are examined and understood through collaborative processes and knowledge sharing. The discussions can take many forms: debates, small group work, and case studies, for example. However, when we incorporate online discussions into our courses, we must, at the same time, consider whether and how to assess them.

Should I require participation?

In answering this question, you might first want to consider how important and what role you believe discussions should have, whether face-to-face or online. Most educators believe that in order to get the most out of a learning experience, students must contribute something to it, and engage with course content, whatever its form. Participating in discussions is one method of contributing ideas, knowledge and resources to the class.

If an online discussion is integral to your course objectives, you should communicate an expectation for participation. Some instructors assign points to online discussion activities to help students understand the importance of spending time and effort in both contributing to, and learning from discussions. Other instructors provide multiple and alternative methods for students to interact with content and perspectives, and allow students to choose the activities they think will be of most benefit to them. This allows for differences in learning styles and interests. In either case, expectations need to be communicated.

You may want to include voluntary discussion forums in which the level of participation and quality of postings are not assessed. Examples of this type of forum include social or café discussions where students may make arrangements for social gatherings, share humour and event announcements, provide Q & A assistance for each other, or just blow off steam in a creative and supportive atmosphere.

If participation in online discussions is a course expectation, how do I assign marks?

It is not usually good practice to assign marks on the basis of number of postings. A few well-constructed, thoughtful postings are far more beneficial to the discussion and learning process than many shorter “I agree” or “Good point” responses. Solid criteria that outline the necessity for thoughtful, high quality involvement are vital guidelines for good online discussions.

You may decide that all students should contribute to three (or five) online discussion activities described in the assignments section of your course outline. You’ll describe the criteria for satisfactory postings and responses, and the weight that each discussion will carry with respect to a course grade. The discussions are treated as any other assignment; you or a TA assigns the marks.

Some instructors set the general expectation that students will participate regularly in online discussions and, with student input, develop a scoring guide based on their own criteria for quality work combined with student feedback. Students submit a self-assessment of their discussion contributions with a grade recommendation to the instructor indicating how well they believe they achieved the criteria indicated by the scoring guide. They may copy and paste actual examples of some of their postings to support their grade recommendation.



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Give Me an Example

Sample Discussion Assignment and Rubric (from: *Structuring and Assessing Online Discussions*, University of Minnesota Digital Media Center, <http://webct.umn.edu/instructors/vista/discussions.pdf>)

Kakfa's Metamorphosis has been interpreted in many ways. The most common interpretations are that the transformation experienced by Gregor Samsa symbolizes (a) the dehumanizing effect of modern life, (b) the Jewish experience in Europe in the early 20th Century, (c) filial shame under an emotionally abusive father. Choose one of these interpretations or one of your own and explain why you think it is the best interpretation of the story.

In order to receive full credit for participation in this discussion, you should also comment on at least two other students and respond, respectfully, with other evidence from the story that supports or challenges that interpretation. If anyone posts a challenge to your own reading, you should be able to defend your position by refuting their point, or concede that their point has made you reconsider your original position.

Points	Skills
4	Posts in discussions indicate careful reading of and thoughtfulness about reading assignments. Readily offers interpretations of course readings and supports opinions with evidence from the readings. Comments on other posts and responds appropriately to comments on own posts. Ideas are expressed clearly, concisely. Uses appropriate vocabulary. Is attentive to spelling and grammar.
3	Posts in discussion indicate reading and basic understanding of reading assignments. Supports some opinions with evidence from reading. Offers occasional comment on other posts and usually responds to comments on own posts. Ideas are sometimes unclear due to poor organization, or poor word choice. Occasional spelling and grammatical errors.
2	Posts suggest incomplete reading or poor understanding of the material. Either does not offer an opinion on reading material or fails to support the opinion with evidence from the reading. Rarely comments on other posts and fails to respond to comments on own work. Frequent spelling and grammatical errors.
1	Posts are rare and do not answer the discussion question, or do not indicate reading and comprehension of the reading assignments. Does not comment on other posts or reply to comments on own posts. Spelling and grammar are so problematic the message is garbled.
0	Student did not use the discussion boards.

Other Considerations

- Assign and structure the discussions with specific learning purposes in mind and be clear about them with students.
- Make certain that the instructions indicate whether or not the discussion will be graded, AND what criteria will be used in evaluation.
- Think carefully about the amount of time required for students to meet the discussion requirements, and the amount of time required for you to assess the quality of their work.
- Spend the time to construct creative, challenging and engaging discussion assignments, which promote participation.

Where Can I Go for More Information?

1. If You Build It, They Will Come: Building Learning Communities Through Threaded Discussions

Edelstein, Susan and Edwards, Jason (Spring 2002) Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume V, Number 1
<http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/spring51/edelstein51.html>

2. Online Assessment, Issue 2: assessing online interactions

Vocational Education and Assessment Center
<http://www.veac.org.au/cndinter.html>

3. A Protocol for Online Case Discussions

Gill, T. Grandon, The Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education
<http://www.mba.wfu.edu/dsjie/Tips/gill170.htm>

4. Using Online Forums as a Replacement for Face-to-Face Discussion Groups

Bishop, George D. and Doiron, Gilles CDTL Brief, April 2004, Vol. 7, No. 4
<http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg/brief/V7n4/default.htm>

Examples of course outlines containing online discussions

CJ292: METHODS OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESEARCH, Spring 2004

Christina DeJong, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University
<http://www.msu.edu/~dejongc/cj292.html>

EDTEC 570, Assignments

Steven Marx, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Educational Technology/Teacher Education, San Diego State University
<http://www.ivcampus.sdsu.edu/departments/faculty/smarx/EDTEC570/570assignments.html>

CDES 271, Spring 2004

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http://www.csuchico.edu/~jknolle/syllabi/SP04/CDES271_policies.html