

**Motivating Students to Participate in Online Discussions**

*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.*

**What Should I Do if Students Are Not Using the Discussion Forum?**

Be clear about your purpose, first in your own mind and then in your instructions to students.

- If the discussion is voluntary and solely for your students' convenience and benefit then you have to accept that some may see the benefit and others not.
- If the dialogue is a required part of an assignment, make it clear how students will be evaluated.
- If the purpose is to reflect on a lecture, book, chapter or experience, 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 how many posts they should read and respond to.

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

- Be clear about length of a post (*a short paragraph, several paragraphs, one or two sentences*).
- Deadlines should be clearly outlined (*by noon on Tuesday, before the next class period*).
- Indicate how many postings students should read and reply to (*read all other posts and select two that are the most like/unlike yours to respond to, read at least five other student's posts and respond to all*).
- 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*).

**Will Students Get More Involved if They Have More Responsibility?**

Try assigning pairs of students to act as discussion facilitators for different forums. You should give them some guidance about what that means (*check the forum every day or twice during the week and post responses and questions*).

As in face-to-face classes, be aware of the pacing and timing of assignments and activities. Make sure you are giving them enough time to post and then go back to read and respond. Also monitor the discussion to determine when students have had enough dialogue and need to move on to a different activity.



**Connect with us:**

5th Floor Bio Sciences

Phone: (403) 220-4949

Email: [lcfeedbk@ucalgary.ca](mailto:lcfeedbk@ucalgary.ca)

## 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 class 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.

## Other Considerations

A primary reason for lack of student participation in online discussions is that they do not see the relevance to class work or understand the importance of online discussions in their learning. It will help if you spend a few minutes during the first class meeting explaining why you believe online discussions are important and how they relate to other course activities and requirements. Finally, do not underestimate your impact as a model - demonstrate your enthusiasm for their exchange of ideas.

## Where Can I Go for More Information?

### 1. The Role of the Instructor/Facilitator

Brief guide to facilitating online discussions. Lists roles of an online facilitator including pedagogical, social, managerial and technical functions, as well as guidelines for each type of role.

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](http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/teach_online.html)

### 2. Avoiding Online Discussion Pitfalls

Ten problems and possible solutions for avoiding problems with online discussions.

Murray, B. (2000, April). Reinventing class discussion online. *Monitor on Psychology*, 31, 54-56.

<http://online.sfsu.edu/faculty/pitfall.htm>

### 3. 8 Ways to Get Students More Engaged in Online Conferences

A one page Blackboard tip sheet.

Klemm, Dr. W. (August 1998). Material excerpted from 8 Ways to Get Students More Engaged in Online Conferences, *T.H.E. Journal*.

[http://resources.blackboard.com/scholar/general/pages/ictraining/Eight\\_Ways\\_Engage\\_Conferences.pdf](http://resources.blackboard.com/scholar/general/pages/ictraining/Eight_Ways_Engage_Conferences.pdf)

### 4. The Moderators Homepage: Resources for Moderators and Facilitators of Online Discussion

Resources for new and experienced moderators concerning online discussion in both academic and non-academic settings.

Berge, Z.L. & Collins, M.P. (2000). Perceptions of e-moderators about their roles and functions in moderating electronic mailing lists. *Distance Education: An International Journal*, 21(1), 81-100.

<http://www.emoderators.com/moderators.shtml#mod>