

Reasons for Online Discussions

The online discussion board tool is often one of the first features that many instructors 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 course 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:

- Instructors who have used the online format frequently report that more students are able to participate in online forums than in large group classroom discussions.
- 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 course material and post more thought-out comments to the discussion board.
- Students and instructors 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 class.
- The online format is a convenient way to archive and preserve your course discussions.
- Online discussions can give you feedback prior to or after a class; this feedback may indicate what content students understand and what requires further clarification.

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Give Me an Example

If your course textbook 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 class as a whole.

This format is particularly valuable to use in advance of a class 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
- Solicit one student to respond to or compare and contrast their response with that of another student

More Ideas

- Discussion forums in Blackboard can also be used for interactions like debates and feedback sessions.
- Small group work or dyadic learning partnership exchanges can be facilitated through discussion areas.
- Guest experts may join the conference with students to respond to posted contributions or answer student questions after a presentation or reading assignment.
- A discussion that begins in class can be continued online or vice versa.
- Small groups can discuss cases and summarize their discussions prior to class and then present the summaries in class.

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 class. Refer to it, tie in particularly cogent comments and questions, and generally incorporate ideas into class remarks and activities.
- Take students' time into account. Consider how much time students need to spend on the discussion and determine if the discussion is part of an assignment or voluntary.
- Take your own time into account. Make sure you structure the discussion so that the task does not require an inordinate amount of your time.
- Give clear explanations on if and how students' participation in discussions will be evaluated.
- Use students to facilitate and summarize online discussions (once you have modeled such facilitation).

Where Can I Go for More Information?

1. Teaching by Discussion

Article about the role of and strategies for conducting effective discussions, originally published in the December 1992 issue of *The Penn State ID* newsletter.

http://www.schreyer institute.psu.edu/pdf/Teaching_by_Discussion.pdf

2. Engaging Students in Discussion Online

Suggestions to help make discussion an interesting, lively, and — most importantly — effective tool for helping your students learn.

From the Center for Instructional Development and Research (CIDR), University of Washington.

[http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/TLBulletins/2\(3\)Discussion.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/TLBulletins/2(3)Discussion.pdf)

3. Taking Discussion Online

A successful online discussion has the same synergistic effect of group or in-class discussion, in which students build on one another's perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the materials.

Posted at the Web Teaching at Dartmouth College Web site.

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~webteach/articles/discussion.html>

4. Discussion as a way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms

Brookfield, S.D. & Preskill, S. (1999). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.