# ITBL

INQUIRY THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING

## Facilitating Effective Online Discussions Series

## Student Roles / Faculty Roles

*Online discussions can provide valuable forums in which complex content and perspectives are examined and understood through collaborative processes and knowledge sharing. They can take many forms: debates, small group work, and case studies, for example. Roles and responsibilities of instructors and students need to be delineated to help things run smoothly.*

- "School is a place where students go to watch teachers work." Have you ever heard the quip? Is it true in your classroom – do you do all the work and the students watch and listen?

- Then, there is another familiar adage (attributed to Confusious)… "Tell me, I forget; show me, I remember; involve me, I understand." *How do you involve students so they understand?*

These two thoughts should prompt us to think further about instructor and student roles in discussions - especially, in online discussions.

## How do we define student/faculty roles?

Many instructors report that keeping up with online discussions takes up too much of their time. This would certainly be true if they did all of the work, from designing the discussion prompts, to monitoring and responding to all student postings, to summarizing and drawing conclusions, to bringing pertinent comments from the online discussion into class, to evaluating and marking student contributions. While you, as an instructor, are responsible for designing the learning environment and might want to be involved in all of these activities at some points in your course, you do not have to be responsible for all of them all of the time. Students can help!

Once an instructor states the course objectives and the learning activities, many roles for students can be established. Students can facilitate online discussions, they can propose online discussion questions and topics, and they can summarize or analyze a discussion and present in class. Increasing student involvement in the development of the learning process can increase motivation and participation. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. Once you challenge yourself to think about ways to involve students-ways to have them take on roles and responsibilities in online discussions, you'll create exciting ways to *involve students so they understand*.

## Teaching
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"The instructor provides the leadership, designs the environment and manages the process; the learner engages the environment, collaborates with other learners, resources and experts to construct knowledge.

Research on learner control purports the more the learners control the elements of instruction, the more rewarding the experience will be. That does not mean total learner control or that students can take control without guidance.

Your task as an instructor or faculty member is to find a balance between total instructor control and total learner control. You will want to create strategies, assignments or environments in which key decisions are delegated to the learner, BUT, design these in such a way that your learning outcomes can be achieved."

*-Teaching and Learning with Technology, Pennsylvania State University*

## Give Me an Example

Depending on the class size, one or two students, or a small group of students might be responsible for facilitating an online discussion about the week's reading, a particular presentation, or a guest lecture. Their job is to, briefly, summarize it, identifying several key points and issues that surfaced. They also generate two or three genuine questions they have about the topic – questions that go below the surface, extending the dialogue and challenging other students to think and respond. The other students must read the original post and then respond to the questions, augment or correct the summary and/or pose additional "meaty" questions. The original students responsible for the discussion or another set of assigned students can analyze/summarize the discussion in either a written paper to submit for a grade, or in a ten-minute presentation at the beginning of the next week's class.

If you have a very large class, dividing the class into several groups and letting each group conduct their own discussion might be the most effective method of implementation.

## More Ideas

- Use a "fishbowl" technique to involve five to ten students in an online discussion with you, the instructor, or with a guest lecturer, author of an article or chapter, a practitioner or expert in the field, etc. The rest of the class is responsible, as voyeurs of sorts, for monitoring the discussion and offering their perceptions afterwards.

- Instead of posting detailed lecture notes to Blackboard, post only an outline or bullet points. Assign students, on a rotating basis, to post their notes as attachments in a discussion posting. This can be extended by having those students also post questions in the discussion forum, asking other students to help clarify certain points. This not only keeps the instructor from having to post detailed notes, but also allows students to share the responsibility of posting high quality notes. Students should take notes every session, but only those assigned responsibilty must post to discussion board.

- Ask students to develop cases or problems related to current class topics. These can be developed by individuals, pairs, or small groups. Several discussion activities could result – use peer feedback to fine-tune the case, propose responses or solutions, identify the most relevant… the most challenging…and thought provoking examples…

## Other Considerations

Whenever instructors encourage and allow students to play more active roles in or to assume more responsibility for class activities, it is important to provide models and/or guidelines. Norms or expectations for behaviour can be suggested by the instructor, or developed in collaborative effort with the students.

Don't try to do everything at once. Stretch yourself, but maintain a comfort level. First, start the journey of online discussion and go a little further each semester until you are where you want to be.

## Where Can I Go for More Information?

1. **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

2. **Teaching with Technology Today, Vol. 7, No. 3: November 15, 2000**

   Keys to Facilitating Successful Online Discussions by Donna Raleigh, Coordinator of Technical Training and Instructional Technology, Media Development Center, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

   http://www.uwsa.edu/ttt/raleigh.htm

3. **Creative Use of On-line Discussion Areas**

   Suggestions to Integrate Technology in Teaching from Teaching and Learning with Technology, Pennsylvania State University

   http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/discuss

4. **Teaching Critical Thinking through Online Discussions**

   by Carol B. MacKnight, Educause Quarterly, Number 4, 2000

   www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/EQM0048.pdf

5. **Collaborative Online Learning: Fostering Effective Discussions**

   TRACE Tip Sheet, Teaching Resource Office, University of Waterloo

   http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infotrac/tips/collaborativeonlinelearning.pdf