As you design and/or facilitate discussions in your hybrid and online discussions, consider the factors that contribute to a successful implementation of online discussion in your courses. The following guideline are suggestions. Find out what works best for your students in the context of your course. Adapted with permission, the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s best practices for effective online discussions.

**Check your assumptions**

- **Students know how to use a discussion board; they’ll make it work.** Discussion boards have been around for years and so your students have likely participated in one previously. However, you need to frame their participation in your forum with clear expectations and guidelines.

- **I don’t want to dominate the discussion (and, frankly, I don’t have time to fully participate); I can just suggest a topic and let the discussion evolve organically.** You’ll need to facilitate the discussion with well-crafted questions and, perhaps, with posts of your own. You also need to monitor the discussion and bring it into the face-to-face classroom.

- **The discussion board can be an optional supplement to the course in addition to the regular workload.** Not if you want the students to use it. The discussion board needs to be integrated into the course. You may choose to include discussion participation in the students’ grades. Consider replacing some assignments in your syllabus in order to account for time spent in on-line discussion.

**Encourage participation**

Asynchronous online discussions provide more reflection time and a potentially less stressful opportunity for introverted students to share their thoughts. However, these aspects do not guarantee participation. The following items are topics to consider for making your discussion board a positive learning experience.

**Community**

Try to develop a relationship between discussion board participants before jumping into class discussions.

- Consider face-to-face encounters or online icebreakers.
- Off topic discussions about favorite free time activities du jour or “getting to know you” posts listing x number of adjectives to describe yourself will start to build a relationship between the students.
- Consider a separate section for outside discussion (e.g. where students can post announcements of campus events). Any type of “water cooler” social energy can spread to class discussion.

**Communicate clear expectations and examples**

Expectations for post content to receive credit, suggestions:

- Must be at least x number of sentences
- Can’t simply be a question – must include background and explanation
- No “I agree” or “+1” posts – explain why you agree
- Provide an example of a “good” post (from previous student – if you have permission from the student – or one of your own)

**Expectations for etiquette**

- Establish requirements for respectful and helpful attitudes in interactions
- If relating stories about yourself or people you know (depends on subject matter), be mindful of protecting the anonymity of others
Training

Make sure your students know how to access the discussion and know what to do when they have arrived.

- Walk through the process in class
- Provide instructions on-line or as a hand out

Facilitating (without being the “sage on the stage”)

Students often like to see lively participation from the instructor; students evaluate those instructors as enthusiastic and adept at demonstrating their expertise. However, instructor posts can also stifle discussion. By observation, most instructors answer questions -- with what is perceived as the “definitive” answer -- instead of opening up more discussion with Socratic questions of their own or proposing parallel topics of inquiry. Here are some tips for facilitating discussion without dominating a forum:

Question types:

To encourage critical thinking

- Craft questions that invite reflection, not a single, factual answer.
- In a topic header or introductory question, provide enough information to help your students think through either deep and focused answers or broad and synthesizing answers (depending on your goals). Encourage them to bring in prior knowledge or outside sources in order to foster more complex thinking/synthesis.

To encourage a high number of posts

- Ask opinion questions. Encourage your students to explain/support their opinions thoroughly. Students that post their thoughts and then solicit the opinions of others will enrich a discussion.
- Include a goal with each discussion question, e.g. "generate as many reasons as possible," "generate counter-arguments," or "generate rebuttals."
  (Note: these prompts typically work well for students with high familiarity with the topic, but may overload students without much prior familiarity.)

To encourage participation among students without much prior knowledge of a topic

- Elaborated questions, i.e. a question followed by a few possible responses to explore
- Provide a guide of question/comment types:
  o Clarification: ask for verification or additional information.
  o Probing assumptions: ask for explanation or reliability of assumptions.
  o Examples: ask for demonstrations of a poster's reasoning process.
  o Viewpoints: ask for and/or present possible alternative viewpoints.
  o Implications: ask for and/or present possible consequences of a poster's reasoning process.

Answering questions

- Encourage students to reply to each other’s questions instead of expecting you to swoop in with the perfect answer. (Replying may be part of the assignment.) This technique proves particularly effective for any topics you have already covered in class.
- When you do answer a question, remind the student(s) of a class discussion, indicate a selection in a text, or point out a website that provides relevant information. Ask the student(s) to report back.
- Establish an FAQ section for questions about participation expectations.
- Consider establishing a separate section for questions about course admin.

**Continuity of discussion**

- Thoughtful facilitation of the discussion board includes in-class discussion of topics brought up online.
- If a discussion stagnates, you may need to plant another question or begin a new thread. Stagnation may also occur in situations where students don't feel like they know enough to contribute to the discussion. See "Question types" section, above, for hints in this regard.
- If a discussion thread migrates to a new topic, you may wish to start a new discussion thread that's more appropriately labeled for it.
- Nip any friction in the bud. Remind them of your courtesy expectations (perhaps in a separate email or face-to-face), and continue the discussion. Any egregious displays of disrespect may warrant a deleted post.
- A fortunate characteristic of asynchronous communication is that you don’t have to make facilitation decisions immediately. Take your time to think about a way to intervene that’s effective for meeting the learning goals for the activity. But do consider that if a post goes more than 24 hours without a reply, everyone may move on (through observation, you will be able to judge your discussion board's culture in this regard).
- Students, too, can facilitate a discussion. Just as you might contact a particularly thoughtful and tactful student outside of class to ask him/her to be willing to partner up with a student or group in class, you may ask a few students to help keep discussions flowing by incorporating some of these techniques.

**Course integration**

Ideally, an online discussion will augment time spent in the classroom and vice versa; this result relies on deft integration on part of the instructor. Make efforts to integrate the online portion into the face-to-face classroom so that students do not disregard the discussion board or, conversely, participate solely online with little effort in the classroom.

**Suggestions for course integration:**

- Use the discussion board as a source for in-class lecture/discussion topics. Mine the discussion for intriguing topics and for concepts that are not clear.
- Make participation in online discussion a part of the students' grade.
- Consider replacing some assignments in your syllabus in order to account for time spent in on-line discussion.

**A note on learning and assessment**

For assessment purposes, the number of posts or comments is a typical measure for participation because it is easy to quantify. However, reading and reflection may contribute just as much to student learning in online discussions. Those students that focus on posting messages to meet a requirement, rather than reading messages, lose the benefit of shared knowledge building through the online discussion.
Works Consulted


Lineweaver, T. T. “Online Discussion Assignments Improve Students’ Class Preparation.” Teaching of Psychology v. 37 no. 3 (July/September 2010) p. 204-9

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