

CENTER FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Online Discussions: Extending Learning and Saving Time

Online discussions enable class participants to engage with each other about course topics beyond the classroom. They also provide students with an alternative way to voice their perspectives and demonstrate their learning. **The following are just a few strategies instructors have used to incorporate online discussions in their courses.**

Plan and Structure Online Discussions

- Ask yourself the following questions:
 - What are the learning outcomes for this discussion? What do you want students to know, value, or be able to do as a result of participating in the discussion?
 - How will you structure discussions?
 - How will you integrate online discussions with in-class discussions or activities?
 - How will you create a learning community and ensure equal participation?
- Consider discussion groupings; some faculty have found that groups of 4-12 work best.
- Regarding online discussion structure, the following are possibilities:
 - Post a set of questions and ask students to join a discussion of their choice.
 - Divide students into groups with different roles—ones that pose, respond, summarize, and comment. Rotate the groups weekly.
- Be aware of how much time on task is required; depending on time needed, adjust other course activities and assignments as necessary.

Set Expectations and Ground Rules

- Explain why you are using online discussions and describe the expected learning outcomes.
- Set expectations for participation
 - Is participation required or optional?
 - How often are students expected to post?
 - How many times must they respond to the posts of others? By what deadline?
 - How long should the posts be?
 - What are the characteristics of a good quality response?
- Clarify your role in the discussion forum.
- Describe how participation will be graded and provide a rubric with examples of unacceptable, acceptable, and exemplary posts.
- Work with students to develop ground rules that foster civility and respect.
- Discuss how you will deal with potential conflicts.

Connect Online Discussions with Other Course Activities

- Encourage students to tie ideas from class lectures and course readings in their responses.
- Start a discussion in class and finish online, or start online and conclude the discussion in class.

Manage Online Discussions

- Have students introduce themselves online at the beginning of the semester to create a sense of community and comfort, encouraging participation.
- Facilitate and energize the discussion when needed, but remain in the background as much as possible.
- Allow students the first opportunity to answer the questions of other students and offer correction and elaboration only when necessary.
- Develop a FAQ board to preempt questions that might distract from discussion.
- In large classes, designate a student facilitator in each group; rotate the facilitator each week.
- Summarize postings at the end of a discussion or assign students to do so.

Asking good questions: The LAW Model

L = What you **L**earned: “Identify one important concept you learned from this activity.”

A = How does it **A**pply: “Apply what you learned from this activity to some aspect of your life.”

W = What are you **W**ondering: “What question(s) has the activity raised for you?”

Assess Online Discussions

- Decide on how you will grade participation: how will you assess quantity and quality of posts?
- Develop a grading rubric for consistency
 - Engage students in developing the rubric to create a sense of ownership.
- Consider having students conduct peer and self-evaluations on discussion contributions.

For further information on this resource and more, please contact the CTE at:

Rubrics can be designed to evaluate the quantity and quality of online discussions:

Student contributions overall	Does not meet Expectations (1)	Approaching expectation (2)	Meets Expectations (3)	Beyond Expectations (4)
<i>Quality</i> Characteristics of posts	Posts do not often address the prompt accurately	Posts provide obvious information without further analysis of concepts; posts lack depth of knowledge or reasoning	Posts provide most of the content required by the prompt, but do not always display further analysis of the subject; posts attempt to stimulate discussion	Posts provide all content required by the prompt and often display further analysis of the subject; posts stimulate further discussion
<i>Quantity</i> Student attempt at fulfilling required participation	Only posts a few times, missing a significant amount of the required posting total as indicated on assignment description	Attempts to post as often as required by assignment description, but misses a substantial amount	Fulfills posting requirements as indicated on assignment directions	Fulfills posting requirements as indicated on assignment directions and beyond

Tools for Online Discussions at Cornell

Blackboard <blackboard.cornell.edu/>

Setting up a discussion forum on Blackboard allows you to post discussion topics and questions. Students can respond to the prompt or to each other's comments.

Piazza <<https://piazza.com>>

Based on the Wiki concept, this tool can be used independently or in conjunction with Blackboard.

Notes and Ideas for my Course:

Selected References and Resources:
 Anderson, T. (2004). Teaching in an online learning context. In Anderson, T., & Elloumi, F. (Eds.), *Theory and Practice of Online Learning*. Athabasca University.
 Brunzell, E. (2012). Blended learning: Adding asynchronous discussions to your F2F classrooms. Edutopia. Accessed at <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/blended-learning-research-eric-brunzell>
 Davis, B.G (2009). *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
 Garrison, R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2 (2/3), 87-105.
 Swan, K. (2002). Building learning communities in online courses. *Education, Communication, and Information*, 2(1).

For further information on this resource and more, please contact the CTE at:

cornellcte@cornell.edu

607-255-3990

www.cte.cornell.edu

Last Edited: 04/25/14