

Online Collaborative Learning Fostering Effective Discussions

Encouraging effective online discussion is not always easy! Here are some planning and facilitation strategies to help you to successfully implement collaborative online discussions into your own course.



Preparing for the implementation of online collaborative discussions

■ Think about how the discussion activities will fit into your course

Whenever you think about introducing a new tool, activity or method into a course, it is essential that you ask yourself both how and why you would use it. You need to have a clear goal/objective for the introduction of the new tool and you need to be able to explain it to your students. This involves thinking about how the new tool will :

- fit within the context of the course;
- affect content;
- alter or add to the teaching methods;
- suit your teaching philosophy and style;
- change evaluation methods.

■ Balance your workload

The more time you can spend before the start of the course planning and creating activities, the less time you will have to make important decisions about the course during the session. It's also a time to think about what you might remove from your course. Online discussions should not be viewed as an "add-on"; rather, they should replace something else.

■ Use asynchronous discussions

Asynchronous discussions allow students to participate in discussions at a time that is convenient for them. This flexibility also gives students time to consider their thoughts before expressing them to others, which is of particular benefit to students who may need time to understand or reflect before responding to a question.

■ Prepare your students for online discussions

Students cannot be expected to "know" how to discuss or work effectively in a virtual group. You will need to prepare students for the work they will be doing. This means not only teaching them the basics of the Discussions tool itself, but also how to engage in an online discussion.

- **Plan to assign grades**

Assigning grades to discussions can encourage participation. It is recommended that discussion count for 10%-20% of the course grade; no additional benefits are observed when the grade is increased above 20% (deNoyelles, Zydney, & Chen, 2014). Grading can consider frequency as well as quality. It is important to provide clear assessment criteria.



Facilitating an Effective Online Discussion: Instructor Presence

- **Provide structure**

Simply creating an "empty" discussion space will not necessarily encourage discussion. Providing structure for students to follow leads to better learning (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005).

- **Clarify expectations**

Students need clear parameters for discussion "posts" to be written (i.e., specify duration, frequency, due dates, and special instructions to be followed). You also need to clarify language expectations (e.g., level of formality, use of slang, and emojis). Outline the rules of good behaviour (netiquette).

- **Focus on small groups**

You have 180 students in your class? No problem! Use the **Groups** tool in Virtual Campus (Brightspace) to form groups of 6 to 8 students, and to provide opportunity for everyone to be heard.

- **Encourage student ownership of the discussion**

Aim for your participation and feedback to be prompt but modest. Your presence online should not dominate the discussion; rather, it should encourage discussion between students. If students direct their responses to you, redirect those questions and comments to the group. Rather than providing answers, stimulate further debate by offering ideas and suggesting resources. The goal is for students to feel a sense of ownership over the discussion.

- **Provide direct instruction to the students**

Direct instruction and feedback to the groups is sometimes necessary to keep them on track with the discussion. This can also help to diagnose misconceptions, which may impair a group's ability to learn effectively from the discussion. A summarizing final comment can be a helpful way to sum up and end a discussion. Overall, the instructor's comments and questions to the groups can be invaluable and can serve as a model for how the discussion should unfold.

Ask a good question

A good discussion starts with a good question! You can invite students to:

- participate in a debate;
- articulate an opinion and support their position by applying course concepts;
- respond to a news item, poll results, quote or excerpt from a book or scientific article;
- share a personal story or a lesson learned during a clinical internship;
- discuss a documentary or video.

Be present to motivate and encourage students

Online presence is essential to will keep the conversation moving forward. Participate by leveraging the following strategies:

- ask questions;
- give and ask for examples;
- identify students who are good at making connections between messages;
- create posts linking other good ideas together to advance the discussion ("V and X make a good point...What do others think?").

① Note that it is critical to give enough time to let the discussion develop without intervention, but to guide the discussion if it goes off course or is lagging. The instructor's presence helps to keep students focused on the task at hand and can help to refine discussions so that the conversations progress past basic information sharing to knowledge construction and, ideally, application and integration of the knowledge

- **Provide access to resources**

The instructor can provide access to a wealth of resources which students can be referred to for further individual or group study. Hyperlinks to online resources can be especially helpful, as they are easy for students who are already online to access.

- **Provide technical assistance**

Your students may be unfamiliar with the Discussions tool in Virtual Campus (Brightspace). Therefore, you may receive technical questions related to the tool. Devise a plan to handle these requests.

This text is adapted from *Collaborative Online Learning: Fostering Effective Discussions*. Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo. <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/alternatives-lecturing/discussions/collaborative-online-learning>



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