



Remote Teaching Updates & Resources

1 message

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[Encouraging Productive Online Discussions](#)

By Kristi Verbeke on Apr 01, 2020 08:36 pm



While setting up an online discussion forum in the LMS ([Canvas](#), [Sakai](#)) is relatively simple, getting students to meaningfully engage in that discussion is not as easy. This post offers some tips for making the most of this simple, yet effective, online teaching strategy.

Planning for the discussion

What are Your Goals?

As with any teaching activity, it can be helpful to spend a minute reflecting on your goals for the discussion. Example goals might include helping students build community, learn something by explaining it, or synthesize and apply what they have learned to their own experiences (Shockley, 2016). Your goal may be to do one or all of these things, but identifying the purpose of the discussion up front will help you better focus your question or prompt for your students.

Writing the Discussion Prompt

Just as with a face-to-face discussion, the question you ask can make or break a discussion. It's especially important to think carefully about how you will open the discussion because you don't have the benefit of modifying in real time if things aren't working like you might in a face-to-face classroom. In general, I have found that using open-ended questions that are tightly focused on the ideas I wish for my students to explore work best. I also have had better success with questions that are relatable to students or when I have asked them to apply the discussion to their own experiences or context. If you wish to

explore question writing a bit more, here are two good resources: [Designing Effective Discussion Questions](#), and [Effective Questions for Leading Discussions](#).

Logistics and Student Motivation

If you want students to meaningfully engage in an online discussion it's critical that you make sure it is worth the amount of time it requires. Consider how long it will take the students to participate. For example, if you have 30 students and you're requiring each to post 5 times to the discussion, that amounts to each student reading around 145 posts and trying to find something meaningful to say in addition to those 145 other posts. This can take up a lot of time. If you're committed to this course of action, make sure it's reflected in how they're assessed.

To ease this burden on the students, you might also consider using smaller group discussions. You can use the groups function within your LMS to create groups of 4-6 students. Each group engages in the same discussion with the same prompt, but it becomes much more manageable for students in these smaller groups. You might even find them more willing to post and really engage in a conversation if they're not overwhelmed with information and posts from all of their peers in the class.

Finally, to encourage students to participate in the discussion, establish multiple posting deadlines. Also consider setting specific requirements for individual posts. For example, if you require 3 posts in a week, require one by Tuesday, one by Thursday and one by Sunday. This will keep the students engaged throughout the week and discourage everyone from jumping on the discussion board at the last minute trying to fulfill the 3-post requirement. Be careful not to be too overly prescriptive here, though. I have seen this backfire when taken to the extreme (e.g., mandating that students meet word counts, reply to a certain number of their peers, etc.). In these cases, students tend to do the bare minimum to meet the requirements without authentically participating.

You might also motivate students to participate by assigning each group member a specific role within the discussion. Roles might include kicking off the discussion, applying details from course content, playing "devil's advocate" or presenting arguments against claims made, and summarizing the discussion. Students can rotate roles in their small groups throughout the course. Stemwedel (2010) provides a great summary of how she uses roles in [this Online Classroom article](#).

Preparing Your Students for Discussion

In addition to planning for the discussion, it is also helpful to prepare your students for the discussion.

Expectations

Explain your goals and expectations for the discussion and what you expect them to learn by participating. If you are grading the discussion (which you probably should if you want meaningful participation), explain how you will be determining grades. This can range from a simple checklist approach (they met your basic expectations/criteria) or a more detailed rubric. In my online classes, I have found it helpful to provide students with a discussion protocol that outlines my expectations. Here is a sample from one of my courses:

“I’ve broken you up into smaller groups consisting of 5-6 people (I find online discussions to be more meaningful in smaller groups. You’re not overwhelmed with reading massive amounts of posts and not faced with the task of finding a new way to say something that’s already been said by others)!”

To participate in the discussion, click on the “Unit 1 Discussion Group” link within Unit 1. Once you enter into your discussion, you’ll see that I’ve started a couple of threads for you where I ask you to share and discuss with others the ideas you generated above.

This discussion is graded (25 points). I would like you to post at least 5 times. Two of your posts should be initial responses to my two questions, but I would like the other 3 to be in response to your peers.

In order for this to work, you cannot wait until the Monday deadline to get your 5 posts in. If everyone does this, no one will have anyone to respond to! You will get the most out of this if you participate early and often! So, I encourage you to post your first responses by Tuesday evening or Wednesday morning at the latest. That way you’ll have plenty of time to think about and respond to the rest of your group members.

Likewise, to get your full 5 points for each post, I expect that your posts will be thoughtful and meaningful. What this means is that a response, such as “I agree” or “Great idea” is not sufficient. Those things are fine to post (you should encourage your group!), but don’t expect them to count toward your 25 points. You’re probably wondering, “Thoughtful and meaningful?? What the heck does

that mean, exactly?" So, let me remind you of the suggested discussion protocol highlighted in my syllabus because it pretty much sums it up:

- *Open with a greeting ("Hi everyone" or if you are responding to a specific person's post, "Hi, Kristi")*
- *Open with a sentence about what you're posting on ("I've been thinking about what makes a strong PowerPoint presentation"). Or if you're responding to a particular person, paraphrase his/her comments that you're responding to ("I really liked the tips you passed along regarding message design.")*
- *Add something new to the discussion. A good discussion post furthers the discussion. Simply saying, "I agree" or "Great idea" is not helpful in moving the discussion along. Add a new thought, ask a question, post a resource...anything that adds to what has already been said.*
- *Close with a greeting ("Cheers, Kristi")*

Hopefully, the discussion will be such that you find it easy to post 5 times (and end up doing more). Think about a really great in-class discussion. There's no reason we can't translate that to this environment if everyone participates and plays their part."

Outlining "netiquette" expectations for students can also be helpful. [Here's a link to an infographic](#) you might share with them.

Participating in the Discussion

Finally, here are some tips to help you and your students participate in your online discussion.

Practice with the Technology

Create a practice discussion to help you and your students get acquainted with the technology. This could be a forum where students introduce themselves or discuss something more fun or casual. Within this forum, encourage students to create initial posts that incorporate more than text in their posts (embed images, hyperlinks, and even video). This will make for a richer (and more fun) discussion. Start the discussion off with your own post modeling these tools for students. This is also a good time to show them how to subscribe to the forum if they wish to get email alerts when new posts are made (this can help draw them back to the course throughout the discussion).

Your Role in the Online Discussion

First and foremost, I want to stress that you should not feel obligated to respond to every student post! This is an opportunity to create community and allow the students to talk with one another. That doesn't mean you should be absent from the discussion. I try to drop in daily and post something so students know I am present and engaging with the class. Just as you would in the classroom, where appropriate, respond to student posts by asking questions, encouraging them to go deeper, or guiding the discussion back on track. Model what you expect of students in your posts and responses. I also like to write a wrap up summary or my main takeaways at the end of the discussion for the class which I post during the next week's announcement.

Discussions are a common strategy in online classrooms. Spending a little time upfront planning for them as well as spelling out and modeling expectations for students can go a long way toward creating a more enjoyable, authentic discussion in the online environment.

References

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