

Improving the Use of Discussion Boards



Teaching Goal

Increase the regularity with which students post to class discussion boards, in addition to enhancing the depth and quality of comments they make in those postings.

Benefits of Addressing - Research and Theoretical Base

Considerable research indicates that the effective use of discussion boards results in...

- Greater cognitive and exploratory learning (Haggerty et al., 2001);
- Increased student-to-student conversation and collaboration (Kassop, 2003; Rovai, 2004);
- More developed critical thinking skills (Collison et al., 2000; Eklund & Eklund, 1996; Newman et al., 1999; Shapley, 2000);
- Greater student empowerment (Kassop, 2003; Kubala, 1998);
- An enhanced sense of race and gender-based equality in the class community (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997; Markel, 2001; Sullivan, 2002).

Method 1. Practice good discussion board moderation techniques

Primary Techniques	Examples/Rationale
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Ask questions to guide student comments and the direction of the discussion.

Open-ended questions are particularly useful in discussion boards, and should be used in lieu of closed-ended questions whenever possible. Play "devil's advocate" by asking probing questions, using contradictions and counterexamples, and challenging students to apply their learning to novel situations, practical scenarios, and prior learning.

View an [excellent example of this methodology](#) being applied in the teaching of an engineering principle.

Weave student comments into your postings as a means of summarizing and subtly assessing.

Quoting student comments goes a long way towards providing confidence and satisfaction in your students, and spurs more frequent posting.

Use role playing as a means of stimulating discussion.

Discussion boards are an ideal venue for students to role play different perspectives and vantage points because of the reflective nature of the tool.

Balance and presence are key aspects of a successful discussion board.

Make your presence known in the discussion boards, but do not dominate them or be overwhelming by posting too often. Posting too frequently leads to short discussions and fewer student postings; posting too infrequently leads students to believe the instructor is disinterested or absent (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003).

The appropriate rate of posting depends upon the context of the discussion, which should be closely monitored.

Encourage student-to-student learning first and foremost on the discussion boards as a means of enabling students to attribute learning and success to themselves.

Student questions directed to the instructor should be answered within 24 hours.

If the discussion board supplements your in-class activities, be sure to draw clear connections between the in-class material and the online discussions.

Extend discussion you have in class to the online venue, asking students to consider alternate perspectives and other criteria which may challenge their assumptions, beliefs and findings.

Empower students by allowing them to facilitate discussion forums through myWPI.

When a student facilitates a discussion board, they feel an increased sense of ownership over their own learning, and the learning of their fellow students - they are more invested in the learning process.

Encourage your students - especially those who do not normally speak out in class.

Regularly reinforce positive behavior and strong comments on the discussion boards through both personal correspondence and by weaving student comments into your own postings.

Resist the temptation to make declarative statements.

Instead of commenting "That's right!" or "Not exactly" in your responses, pose questions asking students to analyze the context of their perspective, or project their perspective onto a novel situation.

Use multiple short paragraphs in lieu of one or two long paragraphs in your postings.	Students spend considerably more time reading shorter paragraphs online than they do longer ones, and remember more of the content (Outing & Ruel, 2004).
Manage flaming quickly and decisively through private emails.	Because discussion boards lack facial gestures and body language, misunderstandings between students can take place. Address them through private emails.
Limit the number of students posting to a single discussion forum.	No fewer than three (3), and no more than seven (7) students should be posting to a single discussion forum. Too few limits the perspectives on the forum, and too many often makes the conversation difficult to follow.

If you choose to use groups, you as the instructor should select them. [Learn how to create groups...](#)

Method 2. Define a rubric by which student comments will be assessed

Primary Techniques	Examples/Rationale
Clearly identify what varying degrees of success look like. Rubrics usually consist of three essential features: evaluation criteria, definitions of what constitutes mastery at each level,	<p>Rubrics may be used to grade either individual student comments, or a series of comments from a student.</p> <p>A very simple four-point scale might look like this:</p> <p>4 Points - The posting(s) integrates multiple viewpoints and weaves both class readings and other participants' postings into their discussion of the subject.</p> <p>3 Points - The posting(s) builds upon the ideas of</p>

and either a holistic or analytical scoring strategy.

In terms of what to grade in the rubric, you might consider addressing the degree to which other student comments are weaved into the comment, as well as the timeliness, relevance, accuracy, depth, and mechanics of the comment.

another participant or two, and digs deeper into the question(s) posed by the instructor.

2 Points - A single posting that does not interact with or incorporate the ideas of other participants' comments.

1 Point - A simple "me too" comment that neither expands the conversation nor demonstrates any degree of reflection by the student.

0 Points - No comment.

Method 3. State clear expectations to students for discussion board participation

Primary Techniques	Examples/Rationale
Require students to post a set number of times per week and discourage last minute posting.	<p>Typically, this requirement includes both original comments and responses to other student comments.</p> <p>The specific number of comments a student is required to post varies depending on the purposes served by the discussion board. As an instructor, you might include the following point as a guidepost for your students:</p>

Students are required to post three substantive original

comments by mid-week and three responses to other student comments by the end of the week.

Provide sample postings representative of each scoring category listed in the rubric.	Generate an array of sample responses illustrating the range of scoring on a rubric. Use student postings from past courses (with their permission) illustrating the range of scoring on a rubric.
Use good Netiquette by being explicit about your expectations for the tone and content of student comments.	<p>As an instructor, you might include the following points as a guidepost for your students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please participate in online discussions as you would in constructive face-to-face discussions. • Please be professional and courteous. • Online communication lacks the non-verbal cues that provide much of the meaning in face-to-face conversations. Choose your words carefully, phrase your sentences clearly, and keep your sentences and paragraphs brief. • State the main topic of your posting in the Subject line. • State your purpose for writing at or near the beginning of your message whenever possible. • Proofread what you post. You may want to use a word processor to draft what

you intend to say, check your spelling and grammar, and then paste your text into the Message section of your posting.

- Please do not use all capital letters. It makes it hard to read, and it comes across as though you were shouting.