Best Practice Guide for Online Discussions

WRITTEN BY:
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In my work across education delivering in high school, higher education, and corporate training over the past 20 years, I have come to value how learning happens most effectively in a participatory and supportive community. The best instructors I’ve known have had that rare ability to lead their students to a better understanding of course material in ways that, to me, often felt magical. Over the years, I’ve learned that some of that “magic” is due to skill and some to great organization. But a lot has to do with an instructor’s ability to build a trusting classroom environment where every student feels heard. That work is hard in any classroom, and can be particularly challenging in an online environment. In my work with leading LMS providers, I discovered that one important way the online classroom can become a more welcoming and engaging space is by bringing students together in online discussion boards. During the past decade, new research into online teaching and learning has helped us understand how central these tools are to a successful online experience. Today, I’m proud to lead an organization whose mission is to support the development of distance learning. And I’m particularly encouraged to see how new tools and technologies are helping students and instructors build the kind of online learning communities that will move education forward. I hope this guide helps you foster deeper engagement in your classrooms, lead better discussions, and create the kinds of learning environments that truly help our students excel.

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Overview

It is more important now than ever to create a connection and dialogue in your course. As faculty determine how to develop this connection, students are already building relationships outside of class. How can faculty develop these relationships in class while also providing them the room to explore the content? One way to accomplish this is to design well developed and engaging online discussions that allow students to explore the content while also pushing each other to dig deeper.

Why is this important?

1. It builds connections within your course that create a community of learners.
2. It allows students to explain what they have learned, which helps them understand more and dig deeper into the topic.
3. Discussions allow students to connect their learning to their experience and the real world.

Discussion boards are a dynamic part of online learning. They provide students with a new way to learn from one another and give you the opportunity to see what your students know. In one study by Vonderwell, et. al. (2007) students found their participation in discussion boards “facilitate[d] a multidimensional process of assessment demonstrated in the aspects of structure, self-regulatory activities, learner autonomy, learning community and student writing skills.” How you frame a discussion matters as well. Gilbert & Dabbagh (2004) found “guidelines that assisted the facilitation and evaluation of online discussions increased the cognitive quality of student postings promoting a deeper and more meaningful understanding of course content.” Studies like this demonstrate that discussion boards help students increase their knowledge of various course topics and build useful connections between each topic presented.

Though discussion boards are a critical part of the student learning journey, many faculty find that students complete the discussion as a way to check something off their list instead of digging deeper into the topic or expanding the subject with their peers. Students often are unable to see the value in discussion boards and view them simply busy work to get out of the way. To change this behavior, faculty need to look at creative and engaging ways to make online discussions a central part of their course and to motivate students to use these tools to truly own their content.
Best Practices

Setting the Tone

As faculty try to develop engaging and in-depth discussions, many times they forget that students need to feel comfortable with their peers and at ease with expressing themselves online. It is critical to create a culture in your course that lends itself to students being able to share. Even discussions that are not sensitive or controversial can still be intimidating to many students. There are many ways to create a culture of sharing within your course. One way is to have students introduce themselves. This should involve more than just rudimentary introductions. Ask easy, but fun, questions (better yet, have your students ask each other these questions). These might include: “What is your favorite color and why?” or “If you could go anywhere, where would you go?” My favorite is, “What would you want to be remembered for when you are no longer here?” You can also ask a question that’s closer to your topic. For example, if you teach a leadership class, you could ask: “Tell everyone about a time that you were a leader.” This gives students an opportunity to share something that is not too personal and also to realize that there are others in class who are like them, which creates a connection beyond their immediate circle.

Informal Sharing

Once you begin this culture of sharing, you should have an area in the online classroom where students ask questions, share something they’ve learned, talk about something outside of the topic at hand, and so on. In my class, I call this area the “Cyber Café.” It is the before class/after class time when students are talking about other things that may pertain to the class, but may not.

Safe Zone

Think about how you would create a safe environment within your face-to-face class. Take that concept and see how you could expand on it to create a safe online environment. This may take time, but as students get to know each other, they are more inclined to share and participate in the discussions more often.

Here are some ways to create this safe zone:

1. Be present and approachable online. How does this work? You need to be active in the discussion from day one. This includes being part of the introductory discussion. Say hi to everyone and welcome them to class. You should also create an introductory post as well and tell the students something about you that you don’t mind sharing. You may actually share this in class if you are teaching face-to-face, but you could expand on it to take the in-class conversation outside of class. Continue this presence within the discussions throughout the semester. Reply to student posts, so you can provide insight into what they are learning or guidance if students go in the wrong direction.

2. Create guidelines (“rules”) and follow them as the class progresses. If you see an infraction, make sure you address it with compassion, but it is critical that students know what not to do.

3. Make sure students know your expectations up front. If they understand those expectations and know you are there to help them if they run into any issues, they are more likely to succeed.
4. Model appropriate participation within the discussion board.

5. Make sure students know that you care more about their content and ideas than about their grammar or syntax.

**Small Learning Circles**

Being present and approachable is only one way to help the students feel comfortable and safe. If the class is large, you could break them into learning circles, so they are interacting with a smaller group of students. There are several ways you can do this.

1. Put students into small groups and have one student each week lead the discussion. Create a chart for each group, so they know when they are expected to lead the group.

2. Rotate group members throughout the semester, so they have an opportunity to interact with more students. Make sure you provide the rotation list, so the students know what to expect.

3. Keep them in the same small group all semester, so they have the opportunity to really get to know each other.

**The Right Prompt**

The most important part of developing discussion boards is the prompt. Make sure the prompt is relevant to the topic and to the real world. Try not to make discussions an “assignment” where they are just answering a question—you want to promote discussion.

When building a discussion prompt, you want to:

1. Make sure the questions do not require just a yes/no answer. They should be open-ended, so the students can explain what they know.

2. Always think about how your discussion is building community. Remember one of the goals of discussion is to build connections within a class, so make sure your prompt is helping students to do that as they discuss the topic.

3. Motivate or incentivize your students to engage deeply and not simply take the “easy way out.” Don’t be afraid to grade your discussions. But try to show students the value of a discussion; experiment with peer feedback (which students sometimes value more than your own!).

**Guidance to Students**

It is important to help students understand that participation in discussions is important to their success in the course. Unfortunately, even the most well-intentioned student can become overwhelmed by too many discussions and might decide not to participate. Sim, Cheung, and Hew (2011) found that students had three steps in the process of participating in a discussion board. The first step was logging into the course, the second step was to read the posts, and the third step was to create their own post or reply to someone else’s. They found that external motivation usually brought them to the course, but intrinsic motivation kept them there and made them post. Some would get to step 2 and if they didn’t see anything interesting to read or there was too much to go through, they would logout of the course. Yet, if they found interesting subjects and a reasonable number to read, then they were motivated to continue and then to create their own post.
To overcome these hurdles, include guidelines about how students should interact with the content.

1. Encourage students to login every day to see if there is anything new in the course. If there is, have them go through it immediately.

2. Let them know what is expected for your discussion and provide them a timeframe to complete each step.

3. Johnson (2020) explains how the development of protocols helps guide students through the discussion with specific prompts that are due at certain times. These can include Part A and Part B, with particular start and ending dates. Creating a process that students will go through during the semester is critical to establish from day one.

4. Send notifications to prompt them to do specific activities in the course as you go through the semester.

*Sim, Cheung, and Hew (2011) Going Beyond Face-to-Face Classrooms: Examining Student Motivation to Participate in Online Discussions through a Self-Determination Theory Perspective*
Developing Discussion Boards

Developing “Rules”

When developing discussion boards, you can allow students to work together to come up with class “rules” for discussions. This gives the students a voice in their learning environment. Some students may still feel uncomfortable with “putting themselves out there,” but allowing them to see that the discussion board is led and controlled by the students often makes them more comfortable. You can start the list of responsibilities and expectations by listing the your top non-negotiables, but students can contribute from there.

These non-negotiables could include:

1. Must post by the due date and respond to three of their peers.
2. Be respectful of each other in the discussion by not shutting someone down or dismissing other’s work.
3. Cite your sources.
4. Be concise.
5. Reread your post before submitting.
6. Ask thoughtful questions when replying to your peers.

Building Topics

There are many ways to develop topics for your discussions. It can be an extension from an in-class discussion that you want to continue after the class has ended or an online class discussion. Here are various approaches you can take while building out a discussion board.

1. Allow students to help develop the topics for discussions. What do they think is important in what they are learning? Why do they feel the topic is important to real-life situations or what real-life situation pertains to the topic?
2. Have students find resources that are associated with the topic. This could be a tool that they used or an article they found. They can discuss how it pertains to the topic or how it helped them understand it better.
3. Have students build a structure or protocol that pertains to the topic. They can share what they built and explain its importance.
4. You can have students post what they are working on in class for feedback from their peers. This is a great way to have them see how others in the class are interpreting the same information and how they applied it to the project.
How to Build Engagement

When you are building your prompt, you want to make sure you grab the attention of your students. Encourage them to write thoughtful and substantive responses to the prompt and their peers, to make connections within the class, and to learn about the topic at a deeper level. A few ways to do this include:

1. Add an image
2. Link to a tweet
3. Share a blog or article
4. Share a video or audio. Make sure the video or audio is captioned. A linked file may already be captioned or you can autocaption original content as it is being recorded.
5. Read every post, but more important, be present—reply to the students’ posts. You don’t have to reply to all posts, but try to reply to all the students’ original posts and ask them questions. It is important that these are authentic responses—and not canned. The students will know the difference.
6. Restate your original prompt if you feel students are off track or not engaging.
7. Add your own reply to the prompt. This demonstrates you are engaged in the discussion; students will participate when they see their instructor participate. This also allows you to model good discussion board etiquette.
8. Allow students to reply to the prompt any way they want. They might post a video they found and explain why it was relevant, or a blog that they read that seemed to resonate, or a PowerPoint presentation that they put together, or an audio or video clip that they recorded. It is critical that students take responsibility for their contributions to the discussion. It is the conversation between the entire class that allows learning to happen.

Staggering Learning

One way to make sure students are participating throughout the time the discussion board is open is to build in due dates for parts of the discussion.

A couple of examples would be:

1. Provide the first part of the discussion due on Day 1 and the second part of the discussion due on Day 3 and the wrap-up piece due on Day 5. This ensures that students are accessing and reading the discussions throughout the week and participating during that time.
2. Have them post their original post by Day 3 and reply to three peers by Day 5.
3. Have them post their original post by Day 2, reply to two peers by Day 4 and reply to two more peers by Day 6.
Types of Discussion Boards

Discussion boards can come in many flavors. It’s up to you to determine the purpose of your discussion board. Is it to expand on a topic you are covering? Is it strictly to build community? Is it a way for you to communicate personally with each student? Is it designed to allow students to ask questions? Here are some different types of discussion boards that you can use and why:

1. **Weekly discussion topic** – this provides students the opportunity to discuss in depth the topic that is being covered that week. These topics are usually part of the course grade.

2. **Open forum** – this forum allows students that “before class/after class time” to discuss anything they would like to bring up in the online environment. This could include an event that is going on at school, an achievement that a student wants to share with the class, an announcement that the teacher wants to share. These topics are normally not graded.

3. **Specific topic** – this can be associated with each assignment or activity, so students can ask questions about that assignment/activity.

4. **Feedback zone** – this can be an area for students to share their work for feedback from the class. This can be an informal area or a more formal discussion that the instructor sets up for specific assignments/projects/activities. There can also be several of these discussion areas within the course used for different purposes—general help, milestones, school resources, etc.
Assessing Discussion Board Activity

There are various ways to assess discussion board activity. It is important to understand what role your discussion board plays within the overall development of your course. Is it a significant element or a supplementary activity? This will help determine the point value for the discussions. For an online course; discussion may be a significant part of your course; in a face-to-face course it may have less weight. Some of this will depend on how critical discussion is to your overall teaching strategy—which in turn will determine how much time students should be spending in the discussions. Here are some techniques for assessing discussion board activity.

Analytic Rubric

An analytic rubric allows an instructor to set grading criteria across various levels of achievement in a visible way. This gives you the opportunity to be quite detailed about what you expect from your students.

*Example of an Analytic Rubric written by Rhonda Blackburn*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>CLARITY</th>
<th>ORGANIZATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Needs Improvement (0-1 point)</td>
<td>Wasn't able to follow the point or provide sufficient evidence</td>
<td>Hard to follow train of thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meets Expectations (2-3 points)</td>
<td>Was clear on development of the point and provided evidence</td>
<td>Clear organization and structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceeds Expectations (4-5 points)</td>
<td>There were 2-3 points that provided sufficient evidence with additional information</td>
<td>Well presented and easy to follow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Holistic Rubric

A holistic rubric provides a single criterion for poor, good, or excellent participation.

### Example of a Holistic Rubric written by Rhonda Blackburn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>DISCUSSION AND TOOLS SCORING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Participation (0 points)</td>
<td>There wasn’t any participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Participation (2 point)</td>
<td>There was participation, which could include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• one post (original or reply)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• only participated on one day instead of throughout the module time period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• first post after the Wednesday before the end of the module.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The discussion could include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• weak understanding of topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• didn’t use literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• with experimentation, weak discussion on tool and its uses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Participation (3 points)</td>
<td>There was good participation, which could include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• an original post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• replied at least once</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• participation at least 1-2 days within the module</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• first post at least the Sunday before the end of the module</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The discussion could include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• good discussion, but could be a little more thoughtful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• used the literature to discuss topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• with experimentation, discussed the tool, but could have a little more in depth understanding and experimentation with it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent Participation (4 points)</td>
<td>There was great participation, which included:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• an original post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• replies to at least two other posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• participation at least 3-4 days within the module</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• first post at the end of week 1 by the first Wednesday of each module</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The discussion included:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• thoughtful discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• expanding the topic beyond the literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• use of literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• with experimentation, a deep understanding of what the tool is, what was experimented, and thoughts on the tool from both usability and educational perspectives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Checklist
A simple 0-1 assessment strategy. The instructor can quickly mark if the student met the criteria or not.

This is an example of a Checklist written by Rhonda Blackburn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>UNDERSTANDING OF THE TOPIC</th>
<th>EXAMPLES TO REAL WORLD</th>
<th>SHARED RESOURCES</th>
<th>SUBSTANTIAL REPLIES TO PEERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Included (1 point each)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Included (0 points each)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participation
You can also grade discussion through participation. You will need to be clear on your expectations of what participation means. How often should a student contribute and when? This can be a very quick way to assess discussions, but be mindful that students will only put into a discussion what they feel they are getting out of it. If they aren’t demonstrating an appropriate level of engagement or learning much from the discussion boards, such assessments have the power to motivate them to do more.

Here are some examples of how you can grade based on participation:

1. Calculate points the end of the discussion by assessing the number of original posts or replies.
2. If you are using a staggered approach, then you can give points based on the participation level at each juncture. Know what you will do if they only participate in some part of the discussion. Will they only receive partial credit? How will you assess that?
3. Give points on how they participated; for example, if they posted an original post then they receive one point, if the students reply back to 1-2 peers then they receive another point, if they reply to 3-4 people then they receive another point, etc.

No matter what grading technique you use, you should always make your expectations and grading scheme very clear, so students know what they need to do and when they need to do it..

No Assessment
There are some discussions that you expect students to participate in, but require a “grade.” Still, it’s critical that students see the value of these discussion areas. One way to do that is to assign “points” to work that exemplifies course values. You can use this information later to determine a final grade for a student who might be wavering between a C+/B- or a B+/A. If they took the extra step to help a peer or participate, it may be worth a partial point to push them to the next grade level.
**Conclusion**

As you build out your online discussions, engagement is critical. Look for creative ways to have students participate. Some students want to use an image or video to help demonstrate what they understand. Providing prompts that have links, images, videos or an interactive component can also help them think differently about the topic. These techniques can also provide students with different learning preferences the ability to showcase their learning in a more authentic way.

Continue to think of ways to provide students guidance on what’s important. Breaking down a discussion into discrete topics allows students to concentrate on one thing at a time, so they can analyze and then synthesize the information as they are building their learning over time. This also gives students an opportunity to engage with their peers in a more meaningful way.

Don’t feel like you are alone in the pursuit of the perfect online discussion. There are many resources out there to borrow from. You can also find faculty portals, like Merlot and OLC, or work with your departmental faculty members. Most schools have centers for teaching and learning or instructional technology–use them as a resource to build on what you already know. Looking at your subject matter from this kind of multidisciplinary lens can invigorate your course and help students connect your content to the real world.

Canale, Herdklotz, and Wilde (2019) suggest that “one of our hallmarks should be a safe, nonjudgmental, supportive, instructive and confidential environment”. They were actually talking about faculty development, but faculty can take this and apply it to the classroom. Some ways to build this environment is through presence, engagement, and support–all of which can be supported through good course design and well-organized- online discussions.
References


Sim, W., Cheung, W., & Hew, K. (2011). Going Beyond Face-to-Face Classrooms: Examining Student Motivation to Participate in Online Discussions through a Self-Determination Theory Perspective. Communications in Computer and Information Science. 177. 10.1007/978-3-642-22383-9_27.


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