Better Blackboard Discussion Forums

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Getting Students to Engage

Use a variety of prompts

- Describe a process, either with a diagram, step-by-step instructions, or (captioned) video
- Take a picture/video of a real-world example, plus write a brief description explaining what it is and how it applies
- Post your questions (Use some as discussion or assignment prompts the following week, or discuss in a face-to-face/Collaborate/Zoom class meeting)
- Tweet your summary/thesis statement/ critique/position/approach
- Write a clickbait synopsis/tabloid headline/ dating profile/product review/advice column of this section/article/character/molecule/ process (Use the best for review sessions.)
- Read the case study, then write a possible diagnosis and a question you could use to test that diagnosis (Answer the questions based on the "actual" diagnosis, to help the class as a whole identify the underlying problem. This works especially well for non-medical issues.)
- Share observations, updates, and/or reflections on individual or group assignments, like research projects and field experiences
- Post and summarize a resource on this topic

Apply their replies

- Write a possible test question based on a classmate's response
- Find examples from the text to support at least two other positions
- Find an example/case study/counter-example from a recent news article
- Use a classmate's position for a follow-up assignment
- Review a peer's draft work

Incorporate it back into the class

- Use discussion forums to generate new discussion topics, test questions, review materials
- Create a rated forum (Forum Settings, "Allow Members to Rate Posts") for questions and tell students to upvote the ones they share

Distribute roles

- Use groups or choice/assigned threads to break up classes
- Roleplay scenarios – students post as stakeholders, authors, characters, skeptical colleagues, naive readers, et al.
- Debate or mock trial – pro, con, and judges
- Different responsibilities within a discussion – weekly facilitators, initial posts vs. replies
- Different tasks – summarize, provide counter-arguments, research the reading's sources and report out, recommend a course of action, find textual evidence, find evidence from other sources, summarize a group discussion for the class
- Jigsaw – first summarize and clarify different topics/questions/readings (groups AAAA, BBBB, CCCC), then share and apply or contrast (groups ABC, ABC, ABC)

Use the right tools for the job

- Use discussions to generate ideas and share perspectives, not to assess content mastery
- Grade discussions for ideas and participation/communication, not writing precision. Save the formal grading for formal writing assignments
- Set threads that help students track topics
- Use tags or rating options to collect student opinions on questions/suggestions/etc.
- If you want original responses before students see others' thoughts, set: "Participants must create a thread in order to view other threads"
- Use the discussion tool for students to share work with the class (e.g., presentations or drafts)
- Assign larger student collaboration via Google Docs, ePortfolio, or Bb Wikis, not discussions
- Allow a choice of discussion formats for small groups (Bb forum, Collaborate/Hangout, or meet up with written summary)

Fostering Thoughtful Interaction on Difficult Topics

Scaffold discussion behavior

- Plan to hold fewer difficult discussions than in a face-to-face class and work on quality over quantity
- Set class guidelines and expectations for discussion - both general netiquette and anything specific to your area. Consider setting these as a class
- Model a respectful, calm, engaged tone
- Start with relationship-building interactions in the first few weeks, such as introductions, low-stakes group assignments or peer feedback (especially ones that focus on the positive), muddiest point discussions, and even a discussion on discussion preferences and expectations
- Follow your first difficult discussion with a reflection activity and instructor feedback on classwide discussion practices

Explore a topic rather than soliciting personal positions

- Ask students to summarize source positions instead of taking their own
- Give roleplay scenarios – students post as stakeholders, authors, skeptical colleagues, et al.
- Ask students to present the part of a different position that they find most convincing/compelling (i.e., "if I change my mind, this would be why.")
- Have students try to expand each other's position statements through questions and clarification, rather than directly debate
- Use one of the techniques under "Distribute roles" (previous section) to structure the discussion more formally

Scaffold the specific discussion

- Prewrite, with instructor feedback and revision, then post the revised version for the class
- Schedule the discussion for a week you can check in consistently
- Intervene if the discussion veers off track:
  - Remind students of the expectations for class discussions and calmly label the problem
  - Refocus on the assignment specifics
  - If there's a major conflict, communicate privately with the students involved, but use a class email or announcement to address the conflict as a whole, so students who don't check back on the discussion board know that you're resolving it
  - Adapt your reflection activity to discuss the conflict (e.g., "Why does X raise such strong feelings?"), if needed
- For especially hot topics, use moderated replies, with a round of instructor feedback
- Use multi-week discussions, where you spiral through the same issue with fresh perspectives as the class learns new approaches

Resources

Discussion approaches

- Mark Lieberman, [Discussion Boards: Valuable? Overused? Discuss.](#)
- Dr. Bridget Arend, [Making the Most of 'Reporting Out' after Group Work](#)
- Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching guide, [Discussions](#) (face-to-face and online)
- Dr. Stephanie Smith Budhai, [Leveraging Bloom's Taxonomy to Elevate Discussion Boards in Online Courses](#)

Netiquette and class discussion expectations

- [Online Netiquette](#), Dr. Marisol Clark-Ibanez (CSUSM)
- [Netiquette Guide for Online Courses](#) (.docx) (U. Florida)
- [10 Netiquette Guidelines Online Students Need to Know](#) (Rasmussen College)

- **UAA BIOL A108 sample syllabus statement**, Dept. Online Master Course
  It is critical that you communicate with all of your fellow students and me in an open and courteous manner.
    - Student decorum is important. I expect open and respectful communication at all times.
    - When discussing a sensitive issue or problem, give each other (or group members) your undivided attention.
    - We can disagree about topics and solutions to challenges, but please understand, I will not tolerate any conduct that excludes, berates or belittles anyone.
    - Please review the [7 C's of Communication](#) for more guidance on how to communicate in this course.

- **UAA COMM A111 sample syllabus statement**, Michelle Scaman

  In this course, students are expected to provide constructive criticism or positive feedback to their classmates. We are a classroom system and we all influence each other. I want to promote a positive classroom climate whereby everyone can feel safe to participate and encourage one another as well as promote a positive learning experience. We will therefore practice rhetorical sensitivity during discussions. Any type of negativity will not be tolerated, whether it is directed toward me or aimed at your classmates. Students are expected to maintain professionalism in the class. We may discuss topics that are emotionally charged but it is important to maintain a positive attitude and rhetorical sensitivity while listening to other people's perspectives and exploring new ideas.

  Anyone engaging in hostile or disruptive behavior will be dismissed from the course. There is zero tolerance for compromising the safety and learning environment of this class. If you have a grievance, please make an appointment to discuss it with me in an appropriate manner. Displaying anger through verbal or nonverbal behavior towards me, your classmates, or in general, will result in removal from the classroom. There is a vulnerability to the subject of public speaking, with class members experiencing various levels of communication apprehension. It is therefore imperative that we work together to create a positive and safe environment. During discussions that involve your self-assessment or background experience, please only disclose what you feel comfortable revealing and material that suits the classroom standards of decorum.

Moderation advice

- Rob Kelly, [Managing Controversy in the Online Classroom](#)
- Errol Craig Sull, [Tips for Overcoming Online Discussion Board Challenges](#)
- Dr. Joy Chavez Mapaye's example of [discussion board conflict](#) and how she resolved it (excerpted from [Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education](#), UAA & APU. This book also has a great section on [setting ground rules](#), although it focuses on face-to-face classrooms.)