

Teaching Insight 13: Strategies for engaging students in online discussions



Online discussion forums can complement the classroom experience and provide additional opportunities for student–student and student–teacher interactions. A summary of strategies shown to be effective in engaging students with discussion boards is presented below. Each suggested strategy has a reference that you can follow up if you wish.

DESIGN INTENTIONALLY

Designing online discussions occurs at two levels: creating a clear and structured environment for students and creating tasks / topics which facilitate discussion and collaboration.

To help students navigate and manage the flow of conversations, you might consider:

- Creating smaller group forums rather than class-wide forums for units with high enrolments (Rovai, 2007).
- Using a clear and meaningful forum structure to help students understand the flow of conversations (Guzdial & Turns, 2000). For example, threads could be based on lecture topics or assessments.

In designing online discussion prompts, the following approaches could be used to motivate student participation:

- Provide an anchor for online discussions. Anchors are prompts, created by the teacher, to contextualise the discussion. These prompts are a stimulus for discussion. Examples include, news articles, videos, case studies or questions asking students to apply in-class concepts to new situations (Guzdial & Turns, 2000).
- Design prompts that allow multiple students to give unique responses (Dennen 2005).
- Motivate students to participate by giving them choice in discussion topics (Rovai, 2007).
- Provide opportunities for anonymous posting. Some tools allow students to post anonymously to peers but be identifiable by teachers. Anonymity allows students to ask questions without the fear of seeming inadequate.
- For discussions about key concepts, design activities which encourage collaboration and peer-interaction (Vonderwell, 2003). These can include team problem solving tasks and opportunities to share personal stories.
- Conduct ice-breakers via discussion forums by asking students to post a picture and share something about themselves (Su, Bonk, Majuka, Liu & Lee, 2005).
- Set aside threads or folders for social interactions. Students report a desire for more teacher–student and student–student interactions on non-academic topics to facilitate community building (Su, et al., 2005).

INVEST IN THE INTRODUCTION

Research shows that students are often uncertain about the mechanics of posting on a discussion forum (Mason, 2011). There is a need for explicit instructions about how to use discussion boards along with an explanation of the relevance of these discussions to face-to-face classes. Some strategies for preparing students to participate effectively:

- Provide in-class demonstrations or introductory videos (for online classes) to help students understand how to post. This will help make students aware of forum features and ways of tailoring their experience of the tool. An example would be to use the discussion boards in the first class. This ensures that the students know how to log in and post. You can also ask a student to demonstrate how to post under your direction.
- Introduce students to the forums in class but you should also refer back to posts, provide feedback about posts, and integrate classroom discussions with online ones.
- Emphasise the benefits of discussion forum participation (throughout the semester) and explain how these can further develop students' understanding of core concepts.

As in other aspects of curriculum design, it is also important to clarify your expectations of discussion board use (Dennen, 2005). You can do this by explicitly stating your expectations, modelling appropriate posts and, if you are assessing discussion posts, making the assessment criteria available before students start posting¹. You should also specify your expectations around the content of posts and the frequency of posts:

¹ Rovai (2007) includes a sample marking guide for assessing online discussion forum posts in his paper. It may be a good starting point if you choose to implement a similar approach.

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- Explicitly state whether there is a correct response and what constitutes a response of high merit. Mason (2011) found that students chose not to participate due to a lack of confidence. They reported a fear of their posts being judged negatively and a belief that there is a correct answer that they did not “get”.
- Clearly state due dates, intended outcomes, and topics to be covered (Shea, Li & Pickett, 2006).
- Specify, upfront, a marking scheme that explicitly states teacher expectations for posts (e.g. posts should apply a concept from the lectures, posts should respond to a peer’s comment; Comer & Lenaghan, 2012).

CREATE AN INTEGRATED UNIT

In a blended learning environment, to highlight the relevance of online discussion work, and thereby motivate engagement, the following strategies are suggested:

- Integrate online and classroom discussions by using forums as a space for further practice of important skills or clarifying key concepts (Dengler 2008).
- Use forums to recommend further resources for extension of learning (Lim & Cheah 2003).
- Summarise students’ posts to highlight key ideas relevant to the issues, examples, and concepts originally introduced in class (Rollag, 2010).

ACTIVELY FACILITATE

Teacher-student interactions have been shown to predict student motivation, academic self-concept, and GPA (Komarraju, Musulkin & Bhattacharya, 2010). Given this, active involvement of the teaching team on discussion forums is important (Dennen, 2005), however, students wanted instructors to wait before responding and to allow peers to reply first (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007). So, there is a balance between posting enough to motivate students but not too much so as to deter students. Some strategies for managing online forums suggested by the literature are:

- Summarise discussion threads (Dennen, 2005). This allows the teacher to “wrap up” the conversation and highlight key points from students’ interactions similar to what would happen in a face-to-face discussion.
- Diagnose and correct misconceptions on the discussion boards (Lim & Cheah, 2003). Students are wary of potential inaccuracies in their peers’ understanding and report appreciating a “check” by teachers (Mason, 2011). This provides students with reassurance about the quality of the responses provided by peers.
- Decide carefully which and how many posts you will respond to. Dennen (2005) found that when teachers posted (too) frequently, the students would address their posts to teachers rather than peers.
- Promote more equitable discussion by inviting students to participate or, privately, speaking with students who seem to dominate the discussion to encourage them to be more inclusive (Rovai, 2007).
- Model acceptance and appreciation of diverse perspectives by monitoring student posts and responding where appropriate (Shea, et al., 2006).
- Post seed questions (as a student). If students are notified that there are questions and responses posted, the activity might encourage them to go to the discussion forums.

PROVIDE FEEDBACK ON POSTS

Giving students feedback on the quality and frequency of their posts allows you to reinforce your expectations of what students should be posting about, how they should structure their posts, and their frequency of posting. This provides students with reassurance about both their understanding and achievement of participation requirements. Below are some suggestions for how you can give feedback in discussion boards:

- Provide feedback on the quality of posts to encourage posts that consider peers’ perspectives and discourage posts that are repetitive or don’t extend the conversation (Rollag, 2010). Consider praising students for bringing questions to the discussion boards and thanking them when they respond to peers.
- Confirm student understanding by providing positive feedback on posts and reinforcing students’ contributions through praise (Shea, et al., 2006).

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- In units where discussion posts are assessed, provide opportunities for students to receive formative feedback on their posts early in the semester to ensure they understand the expectations (Comer & Lenaghan, 2012).

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