

Online Discussion Boards: Five Things to Keep in Mind

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Online discussion forums are a great way to incorporate social presence in your online or hybrid course. However, ensuring they are designed and set up well is crucial to a successful and positive learning experience for students. Here are 5 key things to keep in mind when using online discussion forums.

1) Be clear on expectations

Don't assume that students understand fully what is expected of them. Be clear in the syllabus using netiquette guidelines. Netiquette is the online etiquette expected of learners during online communication. This includes being respectful of the views, opinions, and experiences of others, not using inappropriate or vulgar language, or refraining from writing in all caps... just to name a few. It is important to set these expectations up front to ensure that the online discussion space remains welcoming and positive.

Include clear instructions that outline things like suggested word count, whether or not they should include citations, if they need to respond to other classmates, and if so, how many. This is also a good time to discuss quality of post. Letting students know upfront that "I agree" does not qualify as a thoughtful response to a post. Be clear on what a quality and thoughtful response would look like by modeling an exemplar.

Including rubrics is another great way to set expectations, especially if the discussion is being graded. Rubrics allow students to clearly see under what criteria they are being assessed and clearly shows students what success will look like for this activity.

2) Address the 'so what?'

Include not only what students have to do, but why they are being asked to do it will help students engage with classroom activities. Once you answer the "so what?" question,

students better understand the value of the activity and may be more inclined to participate. Pull in your learner and pique their interest by starting with the rationale and then move on to other detailed instruction. If the discussion directly aligns with a learning outcome for that particular week or module, say so upfront!

3) Determine if the discussion board is the right tool to use

Yes, discussions can be a great way to encourage student-to-student communication, but it is not always the best fit. When deciding if a discussion forum should be used, look at what the learning objectives or learning outcomes are and determine if the discussion board activity will help achieve these goals. There needs to be alignment between the learning objective or outcome and the discussion activity. For example, lower order thinking skills such as listing and defining likely don't need a discussion. Those can be assessed in other, often simpler, ways. Similarly, with higher order thinking skills, like creating, students may not need to discuss what they are creating (unless it is part of a scaffolding project). In short, ask yourself if it makes sense for students to be discussing this topic. Will it help deepen learning in any way? If not, it may be seen as busy work and students may not be engaged.

4) Use prompts/questions that promote discussion

The question or prompt that you are asking students to respond to should be one that lends itself well to a discussion. Closed ended questions such as, "list the 6 sources of conflict" wouldn't make a good discussion question because learners would have nothing to discuss. They could respond to the question and feel stuck. Discussion board tasks that ask students to consider and reflect on their own experiences or questions that may have a variety of perspectives could be more valuable to explore would make for a better discussion. For instance, "Consider your own experience with conflict in the workplace. Briefly describe the conflict and explain which of the six sources of conflict is applicable to your situation." Here, students would have more opportunity to present their difference experiences and perspectives that would give more value to the task for both the student and their audience.

5) Choose an appropriate discussion group size

Discussion forums may be challenging with large classes. It's easy for them to become overwhelming for both instructor and students if many people are posting all at once. Students may be able to have a better experience if they are part of a smaller discussion group. Small group discussions may be more manageable when we expect a lot of back and forth between students. This could also prevent overlap in student response ideas. For instance, case studies that require discussion may be better suited for a small group discussion as it would give students more opportunity to present their perspective with less likelihood of having repetition in the posts.

This list is not meant to be all encompassing, but is a great place to start when creating

discussion activities for your online course!

Image source: "Chat Network Social" by Megan_Rexazin from pixabay

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