

Down-and-dirty Guidelines for Effective Discussions in Online Courses

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Educators who design and deliver online courses must connect with their learners as they do in their on-campus courses. They have to provide true opportunities for inspirational and meaningful learning, rather than a sterile experience of clicking within a labyrinth of links. In an online course, student engagement occurs in three distinct ways: Interaction of the student with the instructor, with other students, and with the content (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Much of the literature on online interaction is concerned with social interaction (student-to-instructor and student-to-student) because of the criticality of social context in supporting learning and as a way to minimize student isolation and increase student motivation and retention (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Without a high-level of social presence (Anderson, 2004; Aragon, 2003; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), learners can feel isolated and disengaged because of a lack of communication intimacy and immediacy (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Therefore, discussion-based activities are the bread-and-butter of many online courses.

Because of the critical role that social context plays in inspirational and meaningful learning, online courses need to include opportunities for rich and relevant discussion, supported by solid instructor facilitation and strong group participation. To achieve this goal, educators need to use strategies that (1) create a sense of learning community in which learners learn from each other and from the teacher (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002), (2) encourage the sharing of multiple perspectives (Bender, 2003), and (3) promote high quality work through collaboration and peer review (Hurst & Thomas, 2004) – without creating an instructional situation in which everyone is online constantly (Dunlap, 2005). Unfortunately, accomplishing this level of social presence in online courses – especially those courses that primarily rely on asynchronous communication technologies – is challenging, even for experienced educators.

The purpose of the following list of guidelines is to help educators new to online teaching, design, facilitate, and manage effective discussions for learners in online courses in order to establish the level of social presence needed to encourage inspirational and meaningful learning. These guidelines do not work in isolation, but work systemically together to create an effective online learning experience.

Setting Participation Expectations

1. Inform learners about your online schedule, and make sure they know how often you expect them to be online.
2. Balance discussion and other activities. Weekly discussions can get tiring, and can lose power if overused. Give everyone a break from discussions.
3. Have discussion participation count towards the final grade. (See #19 below for a strategy –Inspiration Points – that can be used to determine a participation score.)
4. If you have a large class, have smaller groups participate in a discussion instead of the whole group (e.g., if 30 students, have 3 groups of 10).
5. Share guidelines for discussions that help learners understand what it means to contribute effectively to discussions. For example, here is a “Top 10” that I provide my students before we start engaging in online discussions:
 - a. **Be direct:** Share comments, ideas, and suggestions directly with classmates.

- b. **Be specific:** When praising or commenting on others' contributions, avoid being vague. Be clear about what aspect (excerpt, portion, etc.) of the classmate's comment you are responding to. Describe how the classmate's contribution helped you understand the topic or think about the topic in a different way.
- c. **Be non-attributive:** Do not describe a classmate's attributes but rather describe your experience of her or his contribution – the effect that her or his contribution had on you. Use “I statements” that convey your experience of the other person's efforts.
- d. **Share knowledge and ideas:**
 - Applications and examples from the workplace and community
 - Great tips and tricks
 - Unique resources such as useful website, books, blogs, articles, workshop information and/or technical work groups etc.
 - Relevant personal and professional experiences
 - Strategies, tools, and problem solving skills
- e. **Encourage vision:** Present unique, insightful ideas, perspectives and questions that are thought provoking and promote further discussion. Encourage new ways of thinking that makes the group see something in a new way. Disseminate new information and knowledge about the topic being discussed. Demonstrate your ability to see beyond the obvious.
- f. **Contribute to group's sense of well-being and harmony:** Be open to others' comments and ideas. Make statements that support and honor differences. Share thoughts and opinions with others without judgment or prejudice. Make comments that help create a healthy learning environment and inspire people to want to learn more. Make statements that mediate differences and find commonality. Make statements that lift classmates' spirits. When appropriate, share comments that draw the conversation back to the focus of the discussion topic.
- g. **Demonstrate knowledge of the topic:** Contribute to discussions by making comments that are insightful and informed (include resources, personal experiences with a topic, and so on).
- h. **Actively Participate:** Make an extra effort to actively participate throughout the discussion and engage classmates throughout the duration of the discussion.
- i. **Offer Assistance:** Offer assistance to other students and help others who need extra explanation on a topic.
- j. **Ask Questions:** Pose questions and ask for help when needed.
6. An alternative to providing learners with a set of guidelines, have learners develop the “ground rules” for discussion. Have students answer questions like:
 - What is our definition of a respectful, balanced discussion?
 - How will we determine in what order people speak?
 - How do we feel about interrupting?
 - What should we do if someone dominates the discussion?
 - What should we do if we don't hear from everyone in the room?
 - What should we do if we discuss something controversial or uncomfortable?
 - What should we do if someone says something we don't like?

This activity helps students reflect on their own discussion habits, makes it clear to everyone what is expected during discussions and empowers students to stick up for themselves and others when one of the rules is violated (e.g., someone dominates the discussion or keeps interrupting others). It also gives students a chance to practice being in a discussion before they have to participate in a discussion covering a course topic, allowing them to become more comfortable with their peers and the discussion format.

Setting the Tone for Social Sharing and Community

7. Make sure learners understand the need for civility.
8. Personalize your communications. Send a personal message to each student at the start of the semester. Use learners' names in posts.
9. Share a story, related to the content of the course, if possible, that gives learners insight into your values, passions, interests and so on. Consider using a tool such as PowerPoint, VoiceThread (<http://voicethread.com>), or Jing (<http://jingproject.com>) to enhance your story with photos, images, and audio clips (including your voice) – making it a digital story, in other words. See <http://www.augustcouncil.com/~jdunlap/movie> for an example of a digital story that helps my students feel more connected to me (and therefore, more willing to share and participate in course activities, specifically discussion) while introducing an important topic of my courses – values for teaching and learning. Notice that students never see me, but hear my voice, see photos of my family and listen to me describe a life-altering event that reflects my own values around teaching and learning. Now that I have shared, the students are more open to sharing.
10. Use an icebreaker. For example, ask learners to post bios/introductions, including a list of “facts” about themselves – some true and some not true. Have learners guess which facts are false using a “20 Questions” protocol. Other examples include:
 - Completing a sentence – “I was driving my car today when I...”
 - Have students interview and introduce each other
 - Provide a hook – e.g., ask students to describe the weirdest gift they ever received
 - Play a game – e.g., sinking ship with 20 passengers, the lifeboat can hold 12...
11. Give learners non-threatening opportunities to practice participating in online discussions (using the tools, protocols, etiquette, etc.). Consider the following activities:
 - Post entertaining photos (not related to the course content) and ask learners to share their captions.
 - Similarly, send learners to a website that requires they do something and then ask them to share their experience with the group. For example, have them visit <http://trevorvanmeter.com/flyguy/> and respond to the following questions in a discussion forum:
 - What happens to you while you are there?
 - What is your favorite part of the experience?
 - Why do you think I am asking you to do these sorts of activities?
 - Have them visit the Mr. Picassohead website – <http://www.mrpicassohead.com/> – and create an artwork, then submit a link to the discussion forum. Once posted, encourage learners to comment on each other's artwork.

Launching and Structuring Discussions

12. Tie discussions to course events: projects, readings, preparing for an assessment/test, etc. And consider alternatives to the question-answer format such as role-plays, debates, case studies and games.
13. Use high-level questions that are thought provoking, hypothetical, controversial, etc. For example, ask students to complete the sentence (“What most struck me about the book we are reading is...”). Ask questions that require learners to take a position, provide a rationale for the position, present evidence to support their position, and attend to other learners’ contributions.
14. Ask follow-up questions to stimulate conversation. For example, what reasons did you have for saying this? Can you please elaborate? How do you define x? What do you think might be the implications of your previous statement? Are there alternatives to this approach?
15. Limit the number of topics/questions used to ignite a new discussion to two or three. Stack the deck in favor of deeper discussions. Post a separate message for each question.
16. Allow learners to choose which topics/questions they focus on.
17. Use provocative subject lines: “Three reasons why the author is dead wrong,” “Computers program children,” “All we need to know about teaching we can learn from skateboarders,” or “Why I love the Raiders.”
18. Don’t jump into the discussion right away. As soon as you start contributing to the discussion, it has the potential of shutting down ideas—students are less like to share alternative viewpoints. For example, if students start a discussion on Monday, I will wait until Thursday to post (and I make sure students know this is my plan so they don’t think I have disappeared and I am not monitoring). This allows the students to post their original position without being swayed by me. I monitor the discussion, even though I don’t post, during those first few days to get a sense of who is participating, where the discussion is going, what themes are emerging, what misconceptions need addressing, and so on. Then, on Thursday, I post to threads of discussion instead of to every individual student post. This shows students that I am attending to all of their comments, even though I do not have a 1-to-1 ratio of post/response interactions.

Giving Learners a Role

19. Have learners assess the value of discussion contributions, e.g., assigning Inspiration Points to each other. Inspiration points, modeled after the “karma points” approach used by members of the online Slashdot.org community (and similar to the valuing process used by community members of Amazon and Ebay), involve students in the evaluation of the quality of discussion contributions. The idea behind inspiration points is that the learning community, not a moderator or an instructor, should be responsible for (1) determining the value of community members’ posting in terms of helping the community achieve specific goals, and (2) awarding those valued contributions.

To make inspiration points work, I give each student a certain number of inspiration points (e.g., three) that she or he can assign to valued discussion contributions within a certain timeframe (e.g., by week’s end if online, or by the end of the evening session if on-campus). Because the students are evaluating each

other, I work with them at the beginning of the semester to establish criteria for determining “value” and then apply the criteria to their assessment of peers’ contributions and the creation of their own contributions. For example, inspiration point criteria may include sharing original ideas, writing clearly, presenting a coherent argument, providing evidence to support an argument, “listening” to others and incorporating their ideas and perspectives and so on (see below for an example of criteria).

Criteria for Inspiration Points

Here is how we will assign our allotment of inspiration points for each discussion:

- 0 points: Though you may have introduced an interesting idea or contributed to the discourse, it is not original enough, or is somehow unclear.
- 1 point: You provide a succinct, interesting, original, and well-documented argument or idea, or provide a useful link or pertinent fact.
- 2 points: Your contribution is creative and original, and compellingly argues a very clear point. You support your contribution with evidence.
- 3 points: An exceptional contribution to the discourse

Ways to Improve Chances of Receiving Inspiration Points

- Choose provocative subject lines to make our postings stand out.
- Present our own perspectives.
- Write clearly.
- Construct an argument. Provide evidence, present a rationale that supports our positions, and reference the opinions of others, linking to supplementary evidence when appropriate.
- Open up debate by remembering that the best response is one that gets people thinking, and that makes them want to reply.
- Learn from others who have posted before us by reading through the posts and referring to appropriate posts in our own.

Rules for Assigning Inspiration Points

Only award inspiration points to those who have contributed significantly to the discussion – vote trading is unacceptable. Award inspiration points based on the quality of the message, irrespective of the content of the message – vote for exceptional messages even if you do not necessarily agree with the ideas presented.

In my experience, the community-centered focus of inspiration points improves the quality of each post during a discussion because students are more reflective and thoughtful about their responses, make sure their responses are supported by evidence, and work hard to provide value to the learning community by moving the discussion

forward. By using inspiration points, I participate more in the discussion because students have taken over part of or the entire evaluation role. The inspiration points that students accumulate for their valued contributions to the discussion can be used to determine a score for class participation.

20. Have learners write a one-page (e.g., 250 word) summary of the week's (or whatever unit of time used) discussion that includes a general overview of the discussion, an excerpt of their most valuable contribution to the discussion, and an explanation for why they consider it their best.
21. Ask the learners to become discussion leaders. Alternatively, have small groups of learners facilitate a topic.

Engaging Quieter Learners

22. Use strategies such as inspiration points to encourage people to get involved.
23. Besides relevant and engaging activities, create a structure in which learners need to post by a certain time and then respond to others by a certain time.
24. Organize learners into groups to make it more likely that everyone will have a chance to participate—smaller discussion groups of between 5 and 10 learners can make room for everyone to contribute.
25. Assign people specific roles in the discussion: facilitator, questioner, summarizer, devil's advocate, and so on. Then, provide clear directions about what you do specifically when you are assigned that role.
26. Involve learners in a debate, again with very specific role assignments for each person.
27. Put a limit on the number of posts (and length) that any one individual is allowed to contribute.
28. Assign a response order/sequence and require each subsequent responder to post something that extends the previous posts.
29. Use discussion protocols to guide participation, and make sure everyone in the class has an opportunity to contribute. (See the resource - Protocols for online discussions)

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