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Designing Effective Discussions [1]

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When writing discussions, you'll want to ask yourself a few questions which will help define the types of prompts you'll prepare for your students:

- What level are my students at in this topic/field? (entry level, mid-level, mastery level, etc.)
- At this point in the semester, what is the goal for my students? (foundational knowledge, critical thinking, application, etc.)

Based on your answers to the above questions, you'll then decide what the best types of questions or prompts are for your students. For example, entry level students may do more defining, exploration, explanation, or identification. However, students at a more advanced stage may do more compare/contrast, defense, developing, or constructing.

Foundational Examples

Define what it means to....

- Explain why...
- Discuss the implications of...
- Higher Level Examples:
- Compare and contrast the...
- Defend your perspective on...
- Construct a plan to...

Using the Right Tone

What is the correct "tone" that your students should take in a discussion? You as the instructor can set expectation for the tone. In a discussion, it's recommended to be less formal

than typical academic writing. Discussions are a space to share perspectives, expand our own understanding, and try out new ideas. Formal, academic writing with proper citations can be demonstrated through papers or projects... try to leave it out of the discussion space. (However, you may decide to still encourage students to maintain a respectful tone, and use correct spelling and grammar as much as possible).

Your own tone in class sets the stage for your students. Take a look at the following announcements, written in two different ways. Which one portrays a more conversational, open, and relaxed tone?

Example 1:

> "Hello, class. This week we will be looking at the following readings. These are very challenging and you need to focus your efforts strongly to be successful. If you have questions, please direct them to the designated discussion area. I will not respond to email. Also, you can attend the digital office hours I have posted."

Example 2:

> "Hi everyone! I hope you've had a good first week in the course. As we ramp up this week, you'll notice there's a heavy reading load, and some quite challenging selections. Don't get discouraged if it takes you some time to understand these; it certainly did for me when I first read them! Please feel free to ask any questions you have in the open forum, or join me for office hours via Zoom. It may be daunting, but you are more than capable--and I look forward to seeing you grow and learn!"

Tips for Creating Openness or Comfortability in Discussions

Worried that your students may not participate in online discussions? Aside from assigning point values to the discussions (even just 1 or 2 points help incentivize students), try out these tips to create openness and comfortability for students in discussion forums:

Ice Breakers. Use ice breaker topics early in the semester, when students are introducing themselves to each other. Think about funny or unique questions, or maybe having students contribute songs in Spotify to a class playlist (perhaps the theme has something to do with your course topic!)

Small Groups. Students will typically feel more comfortable sharing in a small group (suggested discussion group sizes are around 4-6 students). This discussion group might even stay together throughout the semester - it takes a lot longer to feel comfortable with someone online, than it does in person! To bring the discussion back to the larger class, try having one leader from each small group share a summary back to the class.

Role Play. Using roles gives students a defined purpose in the discussion. You may assign various roles to students, or let them sign up. Allow roles to be rotated each week. Using roles in a discussion works best in smaller groups, but can still be done in the larger class setting as well! Check out Using Roles in Your Online Discussions for more ideas.

Conversational Tone. Demonstrate and encourage a conversational tone for discussions. Try not to grade students on their writing quality or proper citations. This isn't necessarily the time or place for this... save the academic writing demonstration for papers or projects. With a

more relaxed expectation for writing style, students will feel more comfortable to express their thoughts and opinions, without being worried about adherence to a strict writing style.

Are you interested in working with an Instructional Designer to improve your discussions or other course elements? Contact us today! [4]

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