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Designing Online Discussions: Simple ideas for getting started [1]

February 15, 2019 by Lainie Hoffman | Office of Digital Education [2]

I often find myself talking with people about online discussions and how to best set them up. Instructors, in particular, want to know the key to student engagement and best practices for their own participation. This isn't something that has a hard and fast answer – you can certainly find plenty of suggestions, but a lot rides on what's happening in a particular course.

While the details of the best design might be variable, there are a few things that I always suggest planning around when getting started with discussion assignments.

Who are your students?

Use what you know about your audience to help guide your purpose and design. Here are a few more specific examples of how you might apply this question to discussion design:

- Are they experienced students or new to higher education? Students who are new to higher education (and/or to online learning) might need a bit more structure to help them get oriented and be comfortable with expectations for discussions. Also think about modeling good discussion techniques for these students a bit more frequently than you might with a more experienced group. Experienced students, on the other hand, might enjoy a little more leeway in structure so they have space to make it their own. Be careful to not go overboard with this group by completely neglecting structure or parameters – unifying expectations is still important.
- Will students tend to be in the same program, or do they represent a wide range of fields? Knowing this can help refine the lens through which discussions are held. In response, you might choose to narrow a discussion a bit because students will have a known shared interest that allows them to really explore their developing expertise. On the other side, you might broaden the discussion to make it easier for students to pull in different areas of study and compare/contrast what the same topic looks like through a different lens.
- Are students likely to already know one another, or are they potentially interacting for the first time in your course? As in most social situations, it tends to be easier to get the conversation started with people you know. In these scenarios, keep an eye out for outliers who might not be part of the main group – established groups can be intimidating for those on the outside. For courses where students are less likely to already be connected, plan an ice-breaker discussion and consider working up to deeper topics with a discussion series.

What learning is happening in the discussion?

A well-designed discussion will further students' progress toward the course learning outcomes. You may also have some other goals in mind that relate back to values of your unit, school, university, or field of study. Be able to explicitly state the purpose of discussion in your course, and then make sure to share that purpose with your students!

Here is a good spot to start thinking a bit about the tools you're going to be using. If the traditional discussion board is not helping facilitate the kinds of learning experiences you're looking to build, consider alternatives. Ask around or do a bit of searching - you'll find that instructors are using a wide range of alternative options to host different types of discussions. I've seen a lot of successful alternatives, from threaded video boards, like Flipgrid, that offer the opportunity to build community and social presence, to open annotation tools, like Hypothesis, that allow more natural dialogue surrounding readings. Before choosing a tool, consider how the discussion will support course learning outcomes, what access students will have to the necessary resources for participation, and what level of guidance and support will be available over the course of the discussion.

What is your role in the discussion?

Your role should be a balance between letting students take the lead to figure some of it out on their own, and also making sure that you're present, connected, and ready to step-in or redirect. This can feel tricky, but it actually relates closely to the first two questions. Understanding your student audience will help guide you toward greater or lesser involvement, depending on their needs. Knowing the purpose of the discussion will help you refine your approach so that your chosen role will better support the goals of the discussion. Keep in mind that it's ok to change what your role looks like over time as a part of scaffolding or in response to knowing your students better as the semester moves along.

A final thought: sometimes you will also find that what makes sense to use a discussion board for isn't a discussion at all. Don't be afraid to use the board as an exhibit hall for projects, or an area for students to share reflections openly with classmates. Distinguish these alternative uses of the discussion space by giving projects distinct names and writing prompts that properly reflect the different priorities for these assignments.

assignments [3], [4], course design [5], Discussions Online [6], design [7]
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