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Designing Online Discussions: What are we aiming for anyway? [1]

March 18, 2019 by Lynée Sanute | Office of Digital Education [2]

Oh discussions, the often-dreaded exercise of the online experience. The design of a discussion can turn an exciting topic into a banal exercise where students are drafting large, online speeches and grasping at straws to provide two “meaningful” (hello subjectivity!) responses to other colleagues’ long speeches to meet the requirements in time.

Is this what we think discussions should look like?

Let’s step back and take a moment to remember the best discussions we’ve had (personal or professional). What were they like? How did it feel to be involved in a great discussion? What did you walk away with at the end?

For most of you, I’m guess that they were not long, drawn out diatribes. Most high impact discussion involves some level of continuous back and forth exchange. Or perhaps a round robin of thoughts and ideas. And we generally take the most away when the subject makes sense to us, and we can envision a personal impact on our lives.

What are some ways that we can translate these experiences and make discussions more fruitful online?

- Create prompts that promote discussion and contextualize concepts for students. Can they roleplay? Can they conceptualize content in reference to their own lives? How do positive or negative emotions play into the discussion?
- Place students into smaller groups. Smaller groups = less to read. Less to read can translate to less feelings of TL;DR (too long; didn’t read).
- Eschew minimum post/response requirements. We all communicate differently, don’t penalize students for being concise or verbose.
- Don’t use mandatory discussions every single week of your course. Hello cognitive overload!
- Interact as an instructor! Whether you are active in the discussion or providing some type of summarization/clarification in an announcement at week’s end, make it clear you are engaged.

Crafting and engaging in exciting discussions comes with risks. I know that online commenting culture has birthed some of the worst trolling behavior and can influence decisions around designing thought provoking discussions. We want to evoke passion and thought regarding our disciplines. We don’t want an onslaught of ad hominem attacks that destroy the trust and community built in the classroom. Abhorrent behaviors are partially influenced by anonymity, which is easily avoided in Canvas. To further combat this, consider

charging students with creating a code of conduct to adhere to at the beginning of the semester.

In the spirit of great discussion, I'd love to hear how you make discussions work for your course. What do you agree with in this list of ideas? What would you add? Anywhere you disagree? Why?

And exciting news, the next time I appear on this blog I'll be talking about holistic rubrics and why I love them for grading discussions!

effective discussions [3], engagement [4], instructional design [5]
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