

Using "roles" in your online discussions ^[1]

May 3, 2017 by [Sarah North](#) | [Office of Digital Education](#) ^[2]

Are you ready to breathe new life into your online discussions? [Roles in group discussions] You might want to try out integrating roles into small discussion groups, which can provide more variety in the discussion forum and clearly define tasks. Roles can be assigned to students each week, or you can opt for self-selection using a variety of methods.

Not sure where to start? Check out this list and keep in mind that depending on the situation, it might make sense to combine role tasks or have multiple students embody the same role.

Possible Group Member Roles

Facilitator: This student gets discussion going and keeps it moving, often by asking the other group members questions. Makes sure the discussion stays on topic, or publically recognizes the importance of the “tangent” if one occurs. Makes sure group focuses on most important issues and does not get caught up in details.

Devil’s Advocate: Respectfully raises counter-arguments and (constructive) objections. Introduces alternative explanations and solutions.

Current Events Contributor: Seeks out current events as it relates to the discussion topic and provides helpful resources. Integrates current events into the discussion, creating relevancy.

Connector: This person seeks connections between the current discussion and past course topics, discussions, or overall course themes. This person may also find and highlight connections between what other classmates have said within the discussion.

Explorer: Seeks to uncover new potential in situations and people and explore new areas of inquiry. (May easily be combined with the Innovator).

Innovator: Encourages imagination and contributes new and alternative perspectives and ideas. (May easily be combined with the Explorer).

Summarizer: Every so often (perhaps once per question for a list of questions, or at the end for one question), this student provides a summary of the discussion for other students to approve or amend.

Wildcard: Participates in various roles depending on the need, or assumes the role of any missing member.

Role Selection

The next question on your mind may be about how to logistically get these roles... well, rolling. You could pre-assign roles at the start of the semester, or allow groups to organize themselves. Here are some helpful tools in Canvas and online to help get you started:

Canvas Content Page: A content page in Canvas can be set up to be editable by students, in addition to instructors. This can be a helpful central sign-up method for discussion roles, either in a full-class page or unique group pages created on the group's Canvas homepage.

Collaborative Spaces: Using the "Collaborations" tool within Canvas, both students and instructors can create group documents either in Google Docs or Microsoft Office 365 to serve as a sign-up sheet. Students can set this up for their own groups, or the instructor can set it up as well. Remember to unhide the "Collaborations" tab in your course settings!

Free Online Schedulers: A number of free online scheduling tools can help students sign up for their unique group roles. Examples include Signupgenius.com, Signup.com, Doodle.com, or Calendly.com. Another simple option is to create your own sign-up form using Google Forms or Survey Monkey.

Want to learn more about creating engaging, group discussions? Check out these resources, or schedule a one-on-one consultation with a CU Online team member today!

Collaborative Learning and Discussion Resources

Barkley, E.F., Cross, K.P., & Major, C.H., & Cross, K.P. (2014). *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty(2nd Edition)* [3]. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. (1991). *Cooperative learning: Increasing college faculty instructional productivity (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 4)* [4]. Washington, DC: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development.

Palloff, R.M., & Pratt, K. (2004) *Collaborating Online: Learning Together in a Community (2nd Edition)* [5]. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Millis, B. J., and Cottell, P. G., Jr. (1998). *Cooperative learning for higher education faculty. American Council on Education, Series on Higher Education* [6]. The Oryx Press, Phoenix, AZ.

Smith, K. A. (1996). "Cooperative Learning: Making 'Group work' Work" In Sutherland, T. E., and Bonwell, C. C. (Eds.), *Using active learning in college classes: A range of options for faculty, New Directions for Teaching and Learning* [7].

Discussions Online [8], Online Education [9], Roles of Group Discussions [10]

Display Title:

Using "roles" in your online discussions

Send email when Published:

No

Source URL: <https://www.cu.edu/blog/online-teaching-blog/using-roles-your-online-discussions>

Links

[1] <https://www.cu.edu/blog/online-teaching-blog/using-roles-your-online-discussions>

[2] <https://www.cu.edu/blog/online-teaching-blog/author/38469>

[3] https://www.amazon.com/Collaborative-Learning-Techniques-Handbook-College/dp/1118761553/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1492615879&sr=1-1&keywords=Collaborative+learning+techniques

[4] https://www.amazon.com/Cooperative-Learning-Increasing-Instructional-Productivity/dp/1878380095/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1492615768&sr=1-1&keywords=Cooperative+learning%3A+Increasing+college+faculty+instructional+productivity

[5] https://www.amazon.com/Collaborating-Online-Community-published-Jossey-Bass/dp/B00E31EPV2/ref=sr_1_1?skmr0_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1492615643&sr=1-2-fkmr0&keywords=Collaborating+Online%3A+Learning+Together+in+Community%2C+volume+2

[6] https://www.amazon.com/Cooperative-Learning-Higher-Education-Faculty/dp/1573564192/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1492627195&sr=1-1&keywords=Cooperative+learning+for+higher+education+faculty

[7] https://www.amazon.com/Using-Active-Learning-College-Classes/dp/0787999334/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1492627280&sr=1-1&keywords=Using+active+learning+in+college+classes%3A+A+range+of+options+for+faculty%2C+New+Dire

[8] <https://www.cu.edu/blog/online-teaching-blog/tag/discussions-online> [9] <https://www.cu.edu/blog/online-teaching-blog/tag/online-education> [10] <https://www.cu.edu/blog/online-teaching-blog/tag/roles-of-group-discussions>