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## Seven Ways to Facilitate Effective Online Discussions

Posted By *Mary Bart* On March 5, 2018 @ 6:09 am In Course Design | [1 Comment](#)

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Unlike a lot of faculty teaching today, Brian Udermann learned about the potential of online discussion boards almost by accident. It all happened about 15 years ago when he noticed the online discussion forum feature in his institution's new learning management system and decided to set one up for his face-to-face class in health and nutrition.

"I had no idea what I was doing," said Udermann, now director of online education at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. "There were no grades affiliated with it. I didn't even create a prompt, or a question, or an activity, nothing. I just told students, 'Hey, this is available in our class, this discussion forum thing, and if you ever want to go out there and interact with each other, you certainly can.'"

Nothing happened for about a week or so, but then one day a student posted a comment about something he found interesting from the day's lecture. Then another student chimed in, then another. And for the rest of the semester a small group of students would drift in and out of the discussion forum, chatting about the most recent class and the things that piqued their interest.

Fast forward to 2018 and Udermann is teaching others how to facilitate effective online discussions. He knows firsthand the challenges of engaging online students and hears from faculty about the frustrations of trying to find the right balance with their online presence as well as the age-old challenge of cultivating meaningful dialogue among students.

He offers the following seven strategies for creating robust discussion board activities that students will find interesting along with helpful tips for managing instructor workload related to reading and grading posts.

### **1. Identify your optimal number of discussion forums.**

Oftentimes, an online instructor will determine the number of required forums based on the weeks in the semester. So, by default, a 15-week course has 15 forums. That can be too much, especially during weeks where students have midterms, papers, or other large projects due.

In surveys of online students at UW-La Crosse, Udermann says they started noticing a theme about five years ago whereby students said the discussion boards sometimes feel like busywork. It's that kind of feedback that can help faculty reconsider the structure of their discussion board requirements and reflect on what they're really hoping to achieve.

"We always have this conversation with new instructors before they teach their first online course," said Udermann. "Why are you using discussion forums in your class? Is it just because it's an online class, and you think that that's what you're supposed to be doing? What's the purpose? What's the

meaning? What are the students going to learn? What do you want them to achieve based upon their participation in these forums? Are your discussion forum activities tied into the student learning outcomes for the class?"

Once you have the answers to those questions and a clear purpose to each assignment, share it with your students. The reason we're having this discussion forum this week is because \_\_\_\_\_.

## **2. Determine how much you will participate.**

One of the biggest challenges for online faculty, especially new instructors, is finding that sweet spot between having such an overbearing presence where you feel the need to comment on every post, log in at all hours of the day, seven days a week, and dominate the discussion to the point that students don't feel compelled to participate and setting a course on auto-pilot where you check in sporadically and have very little interaction with students other than dispensing grades.

"If an instructor is participating too much, students might start to back off because they know the instructor will jump in," said Udermann. "But if the instructor is not doing all that much, then students wonder where they are. Why are they getting paid to teach when they are never around?"

With experience, instructors often get a feel for the optimal level of presence needed in an online discussion forum to remain visible, offer encouragement, answer questions, share perspectives, and help guide discussion. And it will often vary from course to course, depending on how active students are in the discussion or whether they need some additional prodding.

Instead of making lots of brief comments, some instructors will write up a summary at the end of a week or a unit of a module, identifying four or five themes that may have emerged and highlighting particularly noteworthy comments students had made.

## **3. Create more interesting and engaging prompts**

To illustrate the importance of good online discussion prompts, Udermann likes to share a story about an experienced online professor he met at a conference. The man shared openly about the challenges he had been having getting students to engage fully in the online discussion. Like many faculty, those teaching online as well as face-to-face, he was frustrated by the listless participation. It wasn't until this professor looked inward that he had an epiphany. Maybe the problem wasn't the students, but him.

After examining his discussion prompts through a more critical lens, he could see that they were, in a word, boring. No wonder students didn't seem interested. After retooling his questions and prompts, the difference in student engagement was like night and day.

In addition to spending some extra time formulating effective questions, Udermann recommends getting students to step away from the keyboard and do something that will bring personal relevance to the course content.

For example, years ago he taught an online health and wellness course and one of the discussion forum questions asked, Why is it important to pay attention to the serving size on a food label? Not

surprisingly, the students correctly stated that a nutrition label tells how many calories, grams of fat, and so on that you're consuming with each serving. Everyone's comment said pretty much the same and the discussion quickly devolved into boring repetition.

"I decided to change the prompt—I got rid of the question and had the students do an activity instead," Udemann said. "I asked students to go to their cupboards and refrigerators and pull out five or six things they ate or drank on a consistent basis, look at the nutrition label, and report back on what they found."

The discussion forum lit up with comments from students who were shocked to learn that a serving of ice cream is only half a cup, a fraction of the giant bowl they would normally eat. Or that a serving of potato chips is only about 10 chips, not half the bag. They quickly discovered how many extra calories they were consuming without even knowing it.

"I think students found that somewhat interesting because they were actually engaging in some activity, and then following that up with some discussions with other students in the discussion forum," he said. "Anytime you can pull in a real-life component, it helps keep students interested because they see the benefit for what they're learning."

#### **4. Deal with concerns immediately.**

The know-it-all. The bully. The jester. The over-participator. The seemingly anonymous nature of online discussion forums can lead some students to write things they would never say in a face-to-face class. In some cases, things get misinterpreted without the benefit of seeing the person's face or hearing the tone of their voice. Courses that deal with controversial issues are especially prone to difficult conversations and require a solid framework for creating a safe, open, and productive discussion.

For all these reasons and more, it's important to share with students your expectations for online discussions starting on the very first day of class. Post netiquette guidelines to the LMS and refer to them as needed. Some instructors solicit input from students to help draft the guidelines, which helps to gain their buy-in. And if a problem does arise, deal with it immediately.

#### **5. Grade to your expectations early on.**

Beginning instructors sometimes go easy on students during the first few weeks, awarding more points than an answer deserves because they figure students are still trying to figure things out in the course. Unfortunately, it's hard to tighten up the requirements once you've been lenient.

That's why it's better to communicate your expectations right from the start, which is where rubrics become indispensable. It also helps to share samples of past students' work—from exemplary to poor. Just get permission or remove any identifiable information.

"Share your rubric with students so they know what to expect and how they will be graded," said Udemann. "And if you do give a student a two out of five or a one out of five, be specific in your feedback. 'Here's the reason you got the score that you did.' It's kind of an eye-opener for them and usually gets their attention."

## 6. Utilize guest experts.

Inviting guest experts is a fairly common technique for infusing fresh ideas and real-world relevance into face-to-face courses, but it's used less frequently in the online classroom. Why is that? Advances in communication technology provides numerous ways to tap into the expertise of guest speakers. [Skype](#) [1], [Zoom](#) [2], and [BlueJeans](#) [3] are just a few of the platforms available for video conferencing and collaboration. Conduct the session synchronously and record it for those who can't attend the live discussion. Or just have the guest speaker available for questions via the chat.

"In one of the health classes I used to teach, I had a lecture on cardiovascular health and used to pull someone in who had quadruple bypass surgery to share their experience with students," said Udermann. "So, it doesn't necessarily have to be an academic expert on the topic but someone who has experience with what you're talking about in class."

## 7. Model what you expect.

Because online students don't get the benefit of sitting in the same physical space as you and seeing your energy and enthusiasm for the course and how you interact with students, it's important to be deliberate in modeling how you expect your students to behave in the course. How do you interact with students? Are you friendly, calling them by name and noting their positive contributions? Or are you terse, dashing off a few repetitive comments just to prove you logged in?

"Students will pick up on these things very quickly," Udermann noted.

And don't be afraid to have some fun, starting with the first-day-of-class icebreaker. A lot of classes start with a prompt that asks students to share their name, year in school, major, and why they're interested in taking this class. While that's fine, why not create some intrigue with something like "two truths and a lie." Everyone has to share three things about them, only two of which are true, and people need to guess the lie.

## Summary

As the number of online programs grows and more faculty transition to the online learning environment, the importance of facilitating effective online discussions and using technology to build community in these classrooms will grow as well. Udermann said that one of the common concerns of those teaching online for the first time is the fear that that will lose the ability to connect with students.

"There is always that fear, but the vast majority of time when I interact with faculty after they taught online for the first time, they had a good experience. Probably 85% to 90% of our online instructors continue to teach online," he said. "And most say that they're impressed by the students, by their participation, by the depth of the conversations that they have in their online discussion forums."

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