Discussions in Online Spaces

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Best Practices: Common Guidelines

To ensure that all learning styles are adequately accommodated, that a higher-level of learning is encouraged, and that a safe community is established:

- Consider the purpose of the discussion and connect the discussion clearly to the timing of the course. What learning outcomes do you want to see from your students? Are they aware of the purpose of the discussion?
- Allow adequate time for reflection for discussion posts and to give feedback to classmates. Consider making these due dates fall on the same day of the week. Example: Original post due Wednesday and replies to peers due Friday.
- Establish requirements for original post and reply by providing a clear rubric and/or example for students. Examples provided with discussion prompts free up "the cognitive capacity available for processing the content and contribut[e] to a better-quality discussion" (Darabi, Aubteen, and Li Jin 33).
- Consider writing a separate prompt for the replies to peers to give them a specific idea of what to say in response to their classmates to avoid non-substantial comments.
  - Example: "Find a post that differs greatly from your own analysis and speculate on these differences. Why did you arrive at different conclusions? What could you learn from each other based on your own unique reflection in response to this article?"
- Depending on the course level, consider requiring sources for discussion posts as research demonstrates that online discussions that require outside research achieve more robust results (Herbert 10).
- Create a safe space for online discussion by providing [Netiquette Practices](#) and refer to the [CSU Principles of Community](#). Psychological safety is imperative for productive student engagement by "creating and sustaining a safe, receptive conversational space and context" (Herbert 10).
- Be actively involved in discussion activity by commenting on student posts and responses to classmates. This is a technique that can help bridge the disconnect students may experience in online courses.
- Give clear feedback for discussion results especially in the beginning of the course. Nearly every student will experience a form of "performance penalty" when experiencing online learning for the first time (Gewin).

- Offer clear communication of how to improve on future discussion posts if students struggle. This can even be a general class announcement to save time, rather than individual feedback, with clear examples of how to improve in future discussions.
- Only require one or two discussion replies for students so they don't become overwhelmed, this helps maintain a "reliable cognitive load" (Darabi and Lin).

Best Practices: Writing Prompts

Consider how discussion prompt questions are written. The way a question is phrased will directly influence the quality of student responses, and class discussion is an important way to foster higher-order thinking in Bloom's Taxonomy (Bradley 888). These discussion questions were adapted from foundational research and applied in online learning:

Questions Types Based on Andrews' "The Verbal Structure of Teacher Questions"

Andrews' analysis of questions divides them into three categories: playground, brainstorming, and focal point (Bradley 890). Some examples with sub-types are below:

- Playground
  - *Direct Link*: Refers to a certain part of the article (such as a quote) and asks students for interpretation/analysis
  - *Course Link*: Requires specific course information to be integrated with the content of a course reading
- Brainstorm
  - Question is structured to generate any and all ideas to an issue
- Focal Point:
  - *Limited Focal*: Presents an issue with a few alternatives and asks students to maintain a position and defend it
  - *Open Focal*: Presents an issue with no alternatives and asks for student opinions

Some questions types are better than others, depending on the learning goal:

- "If the learning goal is to facilitate a large quantity of discussion whereby students are giving fairly complete answers to questions, then using the limited focal type would be the best strategy, followed by brainstorm, open focal and direct link" (Bradley 899). *Students have an easier time hitting word counts when writing about their opinions*.
- "If the learning goal is to facilitate students' level of higher-order thinking, then the course link, brainstorm and direct link questions would work best" (Bradley 899). *Structuring a question that requires students to synthesize course material or bring in outside resources leads to higher-order thinking*.
- "Requiring students to choose an argument [Focal Point] and support the viewpoint with a rationale, students were better able to construct knowledge as related to course

content" (Howell, LaCour, and McGlawn 487). *Keep in mind that Focal Point results in higher-order thinking mainly when required to not solely rely on opinion but to bring in course material/outside sources.*

Best Practices: Assessment

Research has indicated assessment of discussion posts is one of the most common gaps of understanding for instructors and can lead to discussion posts not being assessed properly and thus devalued in the course (Wang 126). It is crucial to provide a clear assessment to enhance the quality of online discussions and integrated as a large presence in discussion prompts (Wang 126). The example below (Wang 118) can be adapted and modified to fit the needs of your course.

Assessment Rule	Rationales
You contribute new ideas or perspectives to the discussion. You expand the idea or perspective of the previous posting. You evaluate the previous posting and make your own point. You make references to course materials. You provide evidence-based contribution. You ask questions that lead to more in-depth discussions of the topic or that bring out different perspectives.	• Preventing repeating others, citing long quotes, and posting mere facts • Increasing interactions among students • Helping shape and develop ideas • Facilitating multiple perspectives • Stimulating debate and negotiation • Encouraging students to read, understand, and apply course materials in new contexts • Supporting arguments with evidence • Formulating higher order thinking questions • Expanding and deepening discussions • Synthesizing postings to sharpen the focus of discussions • Challenging previous assumptions • Providing differing perspectives • Provoking new thoughts and interpretations • Promoting dialogues • Ensuring questions are answered discussions • Synthesizing postings to sharpen the focus of discussions

You summarize previous postings on the topic (not simply compile). You provide constructive criticism on previous postings. You respond to questions (not factual questions). You contribute new ideas or perspectives to the discussion. You expand the idea or perspective of the previous posting. You evaluate the previous posting and make your own point.	• Challenging previous assumptions • Providing differing perspectives • Provoking new thoughts and interpretations • Promoting dialogues • Ensuring questions are answered

Resources

- [Canvas List of Discussion Guides](#)
- [How to Create a Group Discussion](#)
- [How to Add a Rubric to a Discussion](#)
- [New Approaches for Online Discussions](#)
- [Five New Twists for Online Discussions](#)
- [Quick Tips for Online Discussions](#)

Citations

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