



# Guidelines for Online Conversations

The guidelines below on conducting online conversations via discussion boards were composed by Cory Wong, PhD\* based upon nearly 10 years of online teaching experience. They are intended to help maximize student engagement, responsibility and co-creation of a vibrant learning community.

## **Set clear expectations and parameters for student posts in discussion boards.**

- Suggested specifications for student posts:
  - Specific length
  - Explicit reference to the course materials (not free-floating opinion); cite pages and quotations
  - Respond/add on to previous comments from peers
  - Add to the discussion – if it doesn't build on what has already been shared, it's doesn't get full credit
  - Encourage students to help each other learn
    - Review others' posts to assess which sort of post contributes to the group learning process; emulate those posts
    - Make it an expectation that students ask clarifying questions and support each other's learning. This includes students responding to peers' questions by following up with additional elaboration on the text/material as their fulfillment of the assignment
    - Reference back to student comments/discussions in course instruction to tie-in their contributions and questions

## **Manage expectations about how/why to engage in online discussions before an issue arises.**

- Provide feedback to students early and consistently
  - Acknowledge which type of posts do not contribute to the learning process (because they don't meet expectations for a high-quality post)
  - Any "off-topic" posts can be named as such before/rather than being deemed "controversial"
- Address any harm caused right away, and do so publicly so students understand that you're paying attention to what gets shared and will intervene
  - This is why setting expectations early on is helpful, because feedback can be given early on to direct and norm how the online discussions are to be used in ways that maximize learning

## **To avoid spiraling "debates," all discussion should be related to and reference course content**

- Faculty can (and perhaps should) include issues and themes of anti-racism, equity, social justice in their course content regardless of discipline.
- This can be done through assignments, readings, examples, assessment, etc.
  - However, it is very risky, potentially harmful, and perhaps a disservice to what students should be learning in class to just "create space" or set aside time to "discuss" or process current events.
  - Make inclusion of these issues applicable to the discipline/content. There are ways to do this with intention and purpose that support students' learning, critical thinking, and more.
  - Encourage students to hold each other accountable if they post anything that does not support the group learning process – (this can include not engaging with posts that don't meet expectations)

### **\*Cori Wong, PhD**

Assistant Vice President for Gender Equity  
Office of the Vice President for Diversity  
Colorado State University

09/10/20