THE TEACHING CENTER
Tips for Fostering Successful Online Discussions

Tips for Teaching with Online Discussions

- **Provide clear directions and examples**: Specify length, frequency, timeliness, due dates, and specific criteria to follow. Be sure to communicate to students what your expectations are for what their discussion participation looks like, both in terms of their initial responses and in terms of the communications with peers. Give them examples.
  - **Example:** All students should respond to peer comments using the formula 2C + 1Q (1 compliment (e.g. "I like how"), 1 comment (e.g. "I agree that…because" or "I disagree that…because," and 1 question (e.g. "I wonder why/how/what…").
- **Pose good questions**: Avoid questions that read like complex exam questions. Provide students with a debatable prompt—ask them to express their opinions and back up their position by applying course concepts, or quoting from the course text.
- **Assign actions**: In wording discussion board prompts or questions for discussion, rather than telling students to "discuss" or "what did you think," hinge your questions on action verbs: find, explain, describe, identify, compare, etc. Move beyond factual inquiry or you won't generate discussion so much as question→answer, question→answer.
- **Provide opportunities for everyone to be heard**: In larger classes, divide students into small groups of 5-6. Canvas makes it pretty easy to put students into discussion groups, as does Zoom.
- **Don't let your presence online completely dominate the discussion:** Encourage students to discuss with each other. If students direct their responses only to you, redirect questions and comments to the larger group. Aim for stimulating further conversation when possible.
- **But, monitor your discussion**: When group participation is very low in breakout rooms or on discussion boards, reassign group members to other groups, provide feedback, and reach out to students who have gone silent.
- **Outline Ground Rules**: If you had a set of community practices for your in-person classes, take the time to work with students to adapt them for this new online learning environment.
- **Make the discussion (or course participation) graded**: research recommends that discussion should count for at least 10-20% of overall course grade (deNoyelles, Zydney, & Chen, 2014). Make it clear to students what they are being graded on. Grade on quality not just frequency. Ask students to identify their best comment(s) at the end of a unit or discussion thread.
- **Provide Opportunities for Reflection**: Give students a chance to voice (or write down) what they've learned from the discussion and how their conversations have reshaped or confirmed how they were thinking about course content. Help students recognize that they've learned through the discussion.
- **Recognize Sensitive Topics**: If a subject might be touchy or challenging for students to engage with, give them an out-clause. Make it clear how they should let you know if something that is being discussed is uncomfortable for them.

A Couple of Possible Structures for Online Discussion Boards

- **The Starter & Wrapper**: Assign one student to be the "starter" for each discussion. The Starter launches the exchange with a question, quotation, or comment about the text or by suggesting potential links between this week's reading and previously discussed content. The "wrapper(s)" meanwhile identify themes, pull out key ideas, and list questions that need further exploration.
- **Save the Last Word for Me**: Instead of requiring a specific number of comments or responses. Ask half the students to find a quotation from the reading that they want to bring to bear on the discussion. They post the quotation and then the other half of the students offer their ideas, interpretations, and understandings of the quotation. Every quote must have at least two responses from two different students. After a designated about of time, the student who posted the quotation explains what they learned from the discussion of their quote.

Online Resources on Teaching with Online Discussions

https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/blended-learning/online-discussions-tips-instructors

https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/blended-learning/online-discussions-tips-students

https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/research-tells-us-online-discussion/

https://at.doit.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Learn@UW-Guidelines-for-Effective-Online-Discussions.pdf

https://at.doit.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/5-Tips-for-Improving-Online-Discussion-Boards-Gernsbacher.pdf

https://gsi.berkeley.edu/gsi-guide-contents/technology-intro/gsi-examples/online-discussion-forums/

http://blog.online.colostate.edu/blog/online-teaching/5-discussion-ground-rules-for-the-online-classroom/

https://it.umn.edu/good-practice/engage-students-online-discussions

https://ce.uwex.edu/five-new-twists-for-online-discussions/