From: Center for Faculty Innovation
To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Creating Effective Online Discussion Boards
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Creating Effective Online Discussion Boards

by Andreas Broscheid

Note: If you have time this afternoon, you can participate in a JMU Libraries workshop on discussion boards in Canvas.

Discussions are great teaching tools. They can help students achieve a wide range of learning objectives: better understand course concepts, apply content to real-world examples, explore different sides of a question or controversy, analyze an important question based on the class readings, and more. Going beyond the traditional learning objectives of Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive learning, class discussion can enable students to make connections with fellow students, learn how to deal with different opinions and emotional reactions, and build community. Finley (2013) notes outcomes such as "increased perspective-taking, understanding, empathy, and higher-order thinking, and more."

Class discussion is an activity well-suited for online learning environments; in fact, participation online tends to be higher than in face-to-face discussions (Orlando 2017). An Edutopia resource guide (2009) notes that online discussions can foster community building, reflection, consensus building, critical thinking, and student leadership.

Online class discussion typically takes the form of a discussion board. Watch a video lecture, take a quiz, participate in a discussion board: this is the common trifecta of online classes. The discussion board typically asks students to post a response to a question posed by the instructor and to respond to at least two other student posts. The instructor hopes that this assignment will spark sustained online interactions among students, but often this is not what happens: students do the bare minimum, and that's that.

This state of affairs is sad, considering the promise that online discussion offers. Even in our current situation, where we have to create online learning experiences on the fly and with little preparation, well-designed discussion boards can offer students and faculty some of the personal interaction that for many of us is at the center of our work as educators. So, how can we create and facilitate discussion boards that are effective, engage students, and help achieve the outcomes promised in the literature? It's not easy, and it doesn't always work, but here are some suggestions:

1. Start with learning objectives and design discussion that try to achieve them.
Do you want students to understand course concepts? Do you want them to explore the intricacies of different positions in a debate? Do you want them to find and evaluate sources? Do you want them to create solutions to important problems? Do you want them to understand each other, develop empathy, and build community? What you ask students to do on a discussion board should reflect what you want them to learn. If the goal is trivial, the interaction will inevitably remain simplistic. If the goal is important, interesting, and challenging, chances are that students will go

beyond clear-cut answers and will interact with each other in an attempt to learn more.

2. Prepare students for participation.
Start with discussion boards that help students get to know each other, learn to use the discussion-board technology, and become comfortable with a learning environment that is more anonymous than the classroom. Contrary to what many might expect, based on our experience with social media, Orlando (2017) finds that students do not tend to be uncivil to each other online. Still, we might ask students to discuss online interaction norms (and how these may be similar or different than the norms from the face-to-face context)—how they can make sure their interactions are clear, informative, and critical. Once this is done, we can introduce discussion boards that focus on a class topic.

3. Be creative in designing discussion assignments.
As a general rule, it is advisable that discussions revolve around open-ended or "divergent" questions that are difficult (or impossible) to solve. Closed-ended questions lead students to converge quickly on an answer and thus stifle exploration of a topic and interaction among the students (Paloff and Pratt 2010). Often it is useful to design a clear structure for student interactions, to help students determine what they can do to interact with each other. In-person discussion formats can serve as models: A collegiate debate structure, for example, assigns students specific positions and roles, asking them to present affirmative and negative statements, cross-examination questions and responses, rebuttal posts, and the like. A fishbowl discussion assigns students to a small group that discusses a particular topic, being observed by the rest of the class, before switching the roles in a follow-up discussion board (Palloff and Pratt 2010, pp. 87-88). Student-led discussions shift the focus away from the instructor, but the student facilitators need to know what they need to do as facilitators.

4. Online discussion board instructions have to be very explicit.
Students have to be told what they will get out of the discussion board, what the learning objectives are, and what they should do to be successful. While such transparency is generally advisable in the classroom, it is particularly important in an environment, in which there is no immediate physical connection between instructor and student. For example, if your goal is for students to understand concepts by classifying examples, you could post a variety of examples and have students discuss what concepts these examples represent. Or you could tell some students to post their own examples, and other students have to guess the concept. If the purpose is evaluating evidence, students could be asked to post links to articles that they find on a particular topic, and the discussion could be about whether and why the sources are reliable. Since too many posts and too few responses tend to pull a discussion apart, discussion structures are often more successful if students are more involved in responding and less in posting mini essays. In a U.S. government class, for example, a sub-group of students could be asked to compose mini essays representing the arguments of different constitutional framers, with the others students having to argue against them. (This could be combined with small-group discussion boards, in which students compose mini essays, which then are discussed by small-group representatives in another fish-bowl discussion board.) Or you, as the instructor, could post these mini essays, and all students had to respond.

5. Participate, give feedback, hold students accountable, and then close the loop.

One of the keys to successful online discussions is active participation by the instructor. (This can take a surprising amount of time, depending on the size of your class!) While you should not dominate the discussion (in fact, a recent piece by Kathleen Ives (2020) suggests that too detailed instructor involvement can undermine student autonomy and engagement), you should encourage students on and off the discussion board in an authentic manner. On the discussion board, respond affirmatively to initial posts and provide suggestions for where the conversation could be going ("This is a productive way to think about the problem, and it raises the question of…."). Of course, discretion is advised, as you don't want to guide a discussion too much. In the background, learning management systems such as Canvas typically enable you to leave comments to individual students. You can commend them for insightful posts, but you can also let those who are not participating know that you'd appreciate their contributions. Finally, you can use grades and rubrics to hold students accountable—and to let them know how to be successful. In Canvas, you can attach a rubric to a graded discussion board, making it easy to grade and to provide quick feedback. The rubric can follow the "one post and two responses" standard, but it can also formulate more demanding requirements, such as "engagement in a sustained conversation" for the highest level of assignment credit. More important than grading discussion boards, I think, are ways to close the loop. For example, after a discussion has run its course, provide a summary (video) lecture or email that highlights the main insights gained and connects them to the overall class discussion. Or ask students to write short reflections where they summarize common themes of the discussion and connect them to the class as a whole (Stearns 2017).

In contrast to, say, recorded video lectures, discussion boards that engage students take creativity but not a whole lot of time to design. As a result, they are well-suited for learning experiences that have to be assembled in a short amount of time and that still offer the type of interaction, exploration, and intellectual depth that we are used to in our in-person classrooms.

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