

Tips for Keeping Online Asynchronous Discussions on Topic

Students often can be unaware of how to successfully discuss online topics. Just as with any other assignment, it's important to structure online discussions and let students know your expectations. Use some of the tips below to help your online discussions be rich and effective.

Plan the Discussion

- Present well-designed questions that keep students topic-focused.
 - ✓ Creating the open-ended question that fosters on-target discussion is a matter of experience. See Bloom's Taxonomy for some guidance.
- Provide guidelines for students on preparing acceptable responses.
 - ✓ Sometimes new online instructors express surprise that their class's threaded discussions did not pan out even though they had heard that threaded discussion is such an effective learning tool online. Usually, these same instructors simply created a space for discussion to happen with no parameters or guidelines. Consider whether you want to create free threads, moderately informal threads, or formal thread and make your expectations clear to students.
- State the expectation that online discussion stay on topic.
 - ✓ Give clear detailed directions to your students on what you want in their responses at the beginning of each thread.
- Provide café or informal threaded discussion elsewhere in the course.
 - ✓ Have more than one threaded discussion in your course. You might have a permanent "water cooler" thread at the very start of your course which students can access as they come and go. A colleague made the suggestion that the "Café" thread or "Student Lounge" thread can be used as a place to get your students to decide on the parameters of threaded discussions in the course – let them jointly decide how structured the thread should be or how often class members should participate.

Provide Thorough Feedback

- Revise the original discussion forum question when responses are off-target.
 - ✓ Online courses offer the instructor flexibility. If a particular question is not working well and students are confused, change it immediately and send out an email to your students regarding the change or post a thread in the threaded discussion.
- Offer consistent summaries of discussion.
 - ✓ Usually the entire class will answer a threaded discussion question by the time the discussion is over. But the class does not always realize this. Send an email to your students summing up the issues presented and resolved in a discussion; pinpoint especially interesting and informative responses by your students. You can also do this by posting a "my two-cents" response after the conclusion of the threaded discussion. Waiting until the discussion is over (if you have placed a date due on it) will help you avoid any "teacher says" syndrome.
- Include a reminder that students stay on topic.
 - ✓ Don't ignore the threaded discussion if you want it to be effective. If students begin to stray from the topic, send out an email pushing everyone back in the right direction, or, better yet, if the direction the students have strayed is a good one, reinforce it and allow the discussion to focus on the new topic.

- Privately reprimand and give constructive feedback to students with off-topic conversations.
 - ✓ Don't be afraid to shoot off an email to a student who is doing a poor job in the threaded discussion. If the problem is chronic and quite disruptive, call the student and make sure he/she understands the protocol of the threads.

Create Rules and Regulations

- Present the rules of conduct to eliminate off-topic discussion.
 - ✓ From the start, detail the “p’s and q’s” of the thread. Or use the informal thread as a place for your students to determine the “p’s and q’s”.
- Provide a reward.
 - ✓ Offer extra credit for excellence in thread participation.
- Provide a grade for keeping on topic.
 - ✓ Make both participation and quality of response a part of your grading policy.
- Screen postings and route off-topic posting to alternative locations with explanation to submitter.
 - ✓ Ask all your students to email to you their threaded discussion responses and post them yourself on the threads. Notify those students whose responses are not adequate.
- Expel offenders after a certain number of off-topic submissions.
 - ✓ Delete threaded discussion postings by those students who refuse to play by the rules and then deny them access into the threads and dock their class participation grade. You also might include threaded discussion responses in an overall Courtesy Code for your course.

References

Lange, D., Moore, G. S. and Winograd, K. (2001). *You can teach online: Building a creative learning environment*. New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.