

Tips for Effective Online Discussion Forums

Online learning need not be an isolated experience. Collaborative learning can be facilitated through the use of online discussion forums (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). This tip sheet identifies the challenges associated with the use of discussion forums and highlights key strategies for implementing effective and engaging asynchronous discussion.

Challenges to Effective Discussion Forums

- The number and length of the postings are often overwhelming to read through.
- Students frequently post their own comments without analyzing others' postings.
- Discussion threads are rarely summarized or synthesized.
- Social hierarchies can develop even in a cyber-community and may negatively influence not only who responds to student postings but also the nature of the responses.

Overcoming the Challenges

- Emphasize guidelines for posting in the syllabus, including required number of posts per thread, optimal length of each post, and deadlines for posting.
- Include a grading rubric in the syllabus.
- Organize students into discussion groups of 5 to 10.
- Keep discussion threads open for one or two weeks.
- Facilitate icebreaker activities whenever a new discussion group is formed.
- Moderate the discussion throughout the thread or designate a student moderator.
- Limit the length of each posting to encourage concise and thoughtful writing.
- Summarize the discussion at the end of each thread or designate a student to do so.

Strategies for Structuring Effective Discussion Forums

- *Jigsaw*. The purpose of a jigsaw is for each student to share relevant highlights from an assigned text with classmates who reviewed different texts. Through this technique, the group gains familiarity with a broader array of sources.
- *Journaling*. A discussion forum is an effective space for students to reflect on course concepts and experiences.
- *Case Study*. Students participating in an online case study receive a scenario about which they must post their insights and recommendations.
- *Role Play*. In a role play, student postings take the perspective of a type of person (e.g. union leader) or actual person (e.g. Abraham Lincoln).
- *Debate*. Students respond by taking a specified position on an issue. Clear guidelines on the structure of the debate and content of postings are critical to a successful debate.
- *Panel Discussion*. Outside experts can join the discussion and field student questions. Alternatively, the panel could consist of selected students who play the role of an expert.
- *Scavenger Hunt*. In a scavenger hunt, students must find websites or web content related to the items on the scavenger list and share with classmates.
- *Peer Review*. Discussion forums can be used by students to facilitate peer review.
- *Competition*. Encourage friendly interaction by posing a challenge and having students respond in the discussion forum. This is also a great way to award extra credit points.

References

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