Managing Online Discussion Forums

Discussion forums are ubiquitous in online classes. If managed properly, these discussions have the potential to be rich, robust interactions that mimic in-class conversations and advance a student’s understanding of a topic. If managed improperly, however, discussion forums can result in shallow conversations that waste time and feel like “noise” or just “busy work.” This document identifies various techniques you can use to make these interactions as productive—and instructional—as possible.

Discuss Your Discussion Forum Expectations

One of the best—but often overlooked—strategies for getting good online discussions from students is for the instructor to model the desired behavior. At the start of the semester, post a message in an online forum explaining how discussion forums will operate, when you will review postings, and why online forums will be used. Remember that the type of language used in these initial postings will influence students’ perceptions of online discussions, so be sure to convey enthusiasm. Provide examples and details. Use sarcasm and humor carefully, if at all, because these emotions often don’t translate well online.

The First Assignment in Your Discussion Forum

Consider assigning an introductory activity to ensure that students know how to use the tools. For example, at the start of the semester ask students to post photos and biographies of themselves, and then instruct them to comment on at least two of their classmates’ postings. In their comments, they should point out one thing that they have in common with the target student. This activity serves the dual purpose of providing valuable practice in navigating discussion forums and building community.
Discussion Forum 101:
Keep these guidelines in mind as you establish and manage an course-based online discussion.

Start Discussion

Pose a discussion question from assigned course materials. The best questions are ones that require students to research and support their answers, instead of merely demonstrating their existing knowledge. Ask for “supporting documentation,” which is different from “supporting your answer.”

Wait. During online discussions, instructors need to pause after asking a question to allow people to respond. Wait time should be considered in terms of hours or days, instead of seconds. Extended wait times foster rich opportunities for reflection; responses are often more insightful than the off-the-cuff remarks sometimes made during live discussions.

Keep Discussion Going

Limit the scope of the discussion. Too many different ideas in a single discussion can be confusing.

Provide follow-up questions. Use probing questions to extend and deepen the discussion. Ask probing questions to recharge the conversation, or use your role as a content expert to contribute special knowledge and insights and get things back on track.

Manage Discussion

Monitor the quality and tone of the discussion. Keep discussions focused on the topic—but if tangents provide valuable new information to the class, consider letting them happen.

Provide feedback for students, either through the discussion forum or privately through e-mail. Praise students (either publically or privately) who have made significant contributions to a discussion.

Encourage Discussion

Respond privately to students who don’t participate in a conversation and probe to find out why. Remember that newcomers to online classes often spend a bit of time lurking, and that’s fine—it takes some people longer to work up their courage to respond than others. Make sure that there are a variety of engaging activities that students can participate in, and then make sure that everyone—even the quiet students—has an opportunity to learn.

Wrap Up Discussion

It can be difficult to follow all of the conversations that take place in a forum, so use “weaving” to help students keep track of the discussion. To use this technique, post messages that recap key points of a discussion and relate it to prior conversations, thereby “weaving” several conversations together into one coherent message.