

facilitate **ONLINE DISCUSSIONS** in an effective way?

What is Online Discussion?

Online discussions often take place in an online discussion board, blog or forum - an asynchronous platform of posting messages or materials. In online discussions, the course instructor is usually the facilitator and students participate by posting or responding to comments about different topics or threads.

What are the benefits of Online Discussion?

Online discussions afford teachers and learners with a range of benefits, including:

- New opportunities for **learning cooperation and idea exchange** (esp. when class time is limited)
- Fostering learner **autonomy**
- Students feeling **more safe and less pressured** to participate
- Strengthening and expanding the **learning community**
- **Convenience and flexibility** in terms of time and space

What are the potential limitations in Online Discussions?

- **Partial and superficial participation:** Participation level varies largely among participants and a few students often dominate the discussion. Students may not take it as seriously as face-to-face discussion.
- **Untimely feedback:** Students cannot get responses or feedback immediately because not all participate in the same time.
- **Distraction:** Students are more likely to go off topics and get distracted.
- **Time-consuming:** Students and teachers need more time to review, reflect on, and respond in online discussions.

How do we create Online Discussions?

Software such as hivebrite, Helprace and Weblog provide a platform for students to share ideas. Course/Learning management systems within each university sometimes also support online discussions in the form of blog and forum.

How can we facilitate Online Discussions effectively?

When based on sound principles, online discussions show great potential to enrich and enhance student learning. However, poorly designed discussions produce counteractive effects. In what follows, we provide practical guidelines under three principles about how to facilitate effective online discussions.

A. Outcome-based topic design

Discussion topics should

- **Motivate students to participate in a meaningful and collaborative way:** the task should not be one that could be finished independently (e.g., Read your lecture notes and answer whether...). Meaningful topics are designed around an unsolved problem or are able to stimulate debates. Connection to real life experience is preferred.
- **Respond to the learning outcomes:** consider the concepts and knowledge students need to become familiar with and their link to the discussion.

Teachers may consider these questions in the design (The Guide, 2017, p. 18, see below Resource):

*Is the task authentic? How is it linked to learning outcomes?
What is the 'controversial' element, issue or problem to solve?*

B. Instructor's interactional scaffolding

The instructor's role is crucial to steer the discussion towards shared understanding and towards students' co-construction of knowledge.

- **Set parameters:** make clear to students you cannot be present at the discussion all the time and let them know when you will be there (e.g., 'three times or twice a week').
- **Establish connection:** address your students by name to show respect and to readdress your position as the instructor (e.g., Further to your question Colin, I ...)
- **Balance participation and power dynamics:** encourage all students to participate and intervene hostile language use in the online discussion. Private conversation may be held with less active participants to motivate them.
- **Give out positive responses:** make sure you acknowledge students' contributions and specify what you appreciate of them (e.g., Thanks for sharing your experience Tanya! It really helps us understand the process of ...)

- **Steer students to think deep and critically:** use more open questions (e.g., *Tom, could you elaborate on why...*) instead of closed ones (e.g., *Betty your answer is wrong*). Post with intentionality to keep the discussion focused and productive (e.g., *Good thought on adapting Shakespeare! But would it be possible if we ...*). For more resources on the question types teachers may use to scaffold discussions, see below Resource [Varying your Discussion Prompts](#) and [The Guide](#).
- **Track participation:** use a Google spreadsheet to check both your and the students' participation, and make sure to provide at least one meaningful reply to each student in a week/month.
- **Provide expertise and feedback:** you may help wrap up a discussion topic by highlighting important knowledge points in a less didactic way (e.g., *Another important angle to approach this issue is ...*). Provide detailed and constructive feedback (e.g., *John I agree with you that...but have you considered...?*) instead of dichotomous ones (e.g., *John your answer does not make sense. The correct way should be...*).

C. Clear instructions and expectations

It is important instructions and expectations of online discussions are clearly communicated to students in advance. Some examples could be found in below Resource [Purdue Discussion Board Rubric](#) and [Discussion Board Guidelines](#). Some highlights are

- **Resource pack for students:** a guide can be provided to students as to how they may politely challenge others' opinions (e.g., *This is interesting, but I do not agree ...Could you further explain?*), justify their own comments (e.g., *I see it this way because...*) and effectively interact with others (e.g., *I do like your idea of ...and I want to present another approach to...*).
- **Assessment:** if assessment takes place, rubrics/ assessment standards/types should be provided to students.
- **Expectations:** including the frequency and length of postings; establishing rules for a caring and supportive online environments (e.g., *Personal affront is forbidden in any discussion*).

Good Practice Case Study

Some university have successfully adopted online discussions in their curriculum. Below are some cases for sharing:

- **University of New South Wales** - Setting up and assessing online discussions in maths teacher education
<https://lto.unsw.edu.au/online-discussions-in-maths-teacher-education/>
- **University of Toronto** – Innovating online discussions (Historical studies)
<https://utm.library.utoronto.ca/showcases/innovating-online-discussion>
- **Wichita State University** - Evolving the Online Discussion Board
<https://www.helixeducation.com/resources/blog/evolving-the-online-discussion-board-at-wichita-state-university/>

Resources and Further Reading

- Discussion Board Guidelines:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XDcjlPmZbIK31NqusCM7pU7cs3K9n2iLbAUoIWXhE/edit>
- Purdue Discussion Board Rubric LDT:
https://www.purdue.edu/innovativelearning/supporting-instruction/portal/files/8.2_Sample_Discussion_Board_Rubric_LDT.pdf
- Varying your Discussion Prompts as an Instructional Strategy:
https://www.purdue.edu/innovativelearning/supporting-instruction/portal/files/8.1_Varying_your_Discussion_Prompts_as_an_Instructional_Strategy.pdf
- The Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education:
www.fold.org.au/docs/TheGuide_Final.pdf

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