Online Discussions as a Pedagogical Tool

Online discussions are often thought of chiefly as a social activity, but they can be a powerful pedagogical tool as well, allowing students to connect and exchange ideas outside of the confines of the physical classroom. Instructors can integrate online discussions into their courses to supplement lecture and face-to-face discussion and spur student engagement. This document outlines some of the benefits of online discussions as a teaching tool and provides tips for making online discussions successful.

Why Should You Use Online Discussions in the Classroom?

1 Keep students engaged

Research has shown the importance of maintaining student engagement outside of the confines of the traditional classroom (Taylor and Parsons 2011). Online discussion boards can help make sure that students will continue to engage with your material even when not in class and can help them to better prepare for the next in-class discussion.

2 Encourage inclusive pedagogy

In-class discussions are sometimes dominated by the most extroverted students. Online discussion boards give students who are uncomfortable about speaking up in class or non-native speakers who need more time to process a chance to express their thoughts, and instructors can use their posts and comments in the classroom to ease them into in-class discussions.

3 Best of low- and high-stakes exercise

Online discussions usually carry a low overall grade point value because low-stakes exercises better encourage brain-storming ideas or working out arguments. However, since online discussions are viewable by all members of the class, they tend to carry a high-stake psychological value to students and encourage them to perform well despite having a relatively low impact on their overall grades.

3 Keys to Successful Online Discussions

1 Use it for exchanging ideas

Avoid requiring students to post to a discussion board simply as proof that they have done their assigned reading; this is known to cause students to react negatively and lose interest. If you want to check that students are keeping up with their reading, consider having them take a Canvas quiz or submit an annotated PDF (either through the Canvas Student app, Adobe Reader, or *Hypothes.is*) instead.

2 Value quality over quantity

Reading and keeping up with discussions takes time and effort; requiring constant discussion from everyone can be overwhelming for students and instructor alike. Especially in large classes, you might consider breaking the students up into small groups for discussion using Canvas Groups and/or alternating required posting.

3 Demonstrate relevance & oversight

It is helpful to tie the discussion back to the classroom and interject occasional comments to encourage your students to consider different ideas or approaches. For example, you might select two or three good comments from the online discussion and use them as a jumping-off point for classroom discussion. This helps students to feel that what they say and do online is important and not ephemeral.
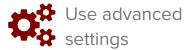
Advanced Uses of Online Discussions

Assign roles

You may want to designate a student to post the initial question and other students to respond with comments. Rotating these roles helps give every student a chance to lead discussion.

Be creative

Think outside the box and introduce variety. Some examples: Before an exam, ask the students to submit a list of exam review questions and have them vote on which questions are most important to go over. Or, have students use a Voices blog to create a collection of digital artifacts as scaffolding for a larger project.

Use advanced settings

Canvas discussion boards allow you to require students to post before they can see others' posts. This helps keep students from passively reading the discussion without participating.

Other Considerations

- **Prompt assessment/feedback:** Instructors who provide timely feedback to student posts/comments have found that students remain more engaged, have fewer complaints about grades later in the course, and are more likely to stay on schedule in the discussion (Baker 2011).
- **Clear and transparent learning goals**: Students are more likely to post better posts if they know why they are having the online discussion and what it is they are meant to get out of it.
- **Explicit expectations for grading**: Instructors who use online discussions as graded assignments report that they obtain much better results when they make clear at the beginning of the course what they expect from students: when they are expected to post/comment, how often, and what constitutes a "quality" post/comment (in terms both of length and of content). (Vidmar 2004; Baker 2011) Consider providing an **exemplar** of a "quality" post/comment to students or establish a **rubric** for online discussions (Beckett, Amaro-Jiménez, and Beckett 2010; Baker 2011; Woods and Bliss 2016). You can create a rubric before the course begins, or, even better, work with the students to draft a set of rubrics.
- **Privacy issues**: Canvas discussion boards and Voices blogs allow you to control who can see students' posts and comments, but if you are using external platforms such as Twitter or Facebook where posts and comments are visible to the Internet, it is important that you safeguard students' privacy to remain in compliance with FERPA. For example, you might require students to come up with pseudonyms that they will use when posting. Email *academictech@uchicago.edu* to set up a consultation for help with protecting student privacy.

Citations

- Baker, David L. "Designing and Orchestrating Online Discussions." *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* 7.3 (Sept. 2011), 401-411.
- Beckett, Gulbahar, Carla Amaro-Jiménez, and Kelvin S. Beckett. "Students' Use of Asychronous Discussions for Academic Discourse Socialization." *Distance Education* 31.3 (2010), 315-333.
- Taylor, Leah, and Jim Parsons. "Improving Student Engagement." *Current Issues in Education* 14.1 (2011), 1-32.
- Vidmar, Dale. "Student Facilitation, Self-assessment Can Improve Threaded Discussions." *Online Classroom* (May 2004), 1-2.
- Woods, Kathryn, and Kadi Bliss. "Facilitating Successful Online Discussions." *Journal of Effective Teaching* 16.2 (2016), 76-92.

Getting Help

For more information on how to use online discussion successfully in your course, email *academictech@uchicago.edu* to set up an individual consultation.