Facilitating Effective Online Discussions

RESOURCE GUIDE

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Introduction

Higher education should go beyond dissemination of content/information and include "engagement with others in the gradual development of their personal understanding". (Laurillard, 2000, p. 137). The importance of learning through discussion-based activities has been long emphasized starting from the days of on Vygotsky, and that learning environments require not only active, but interactive engagement – students interacting with each other and with their instructor. Learning management systems (LMS) have computer-medicated communication tools to facilitate student-student and student-instructor interactions. Online discussions are typically supported by synchronous chats and asynchronous discussion forums in an LMS. Table 1 provides a quick summary of what, when, why and how of the two modes of communications and discussions, and is adapted from Hrastinski (2008).

Table 1: Asynchronous vs Synchronous Modes of Discussion

	Asynchronous	**Synchronous**
What	Delayed mode of communication Allows for cognitive participation	Real-time communication Supports personal particiaption
When	Reflecting on complex issues	Discussing less complex issues Brainstorming ideas Getting acquainted Planning tasks
Why	Increased reflection & ability to process information Students have more time to reflect, as an immediate answer is not expected	Increased excitement and motivation to participate Students become more committed and motivated because a quick response is expected
How	Use asynchronous tools (discussion forums, e-mail, and blogs)	Use synchronous tools (chat, videoconferencing, instant messaging and online meetings)

Adapted from Hrastinski, S. (2008). Asynchronous and Synchronous E-Learning

Learning through Discussions

The pedagogical rationale for online discussions is social constructivism, through which students derive or construct new knowledge through the process of social interaction with their peers and instructors (Vygotsky, 1978). The fundamental question to ask then what are the approaches to learning through discussion. Four different ways emerged from a study by Ellis *et al.* (2006) as to how students used discussions to promote learning, and of which the first two were typically at a surface learning level while the last two were deep learning methods. The first is for students to check and be sure that their ideas were the right ones and that they were learning the right things. Second, students used discussions as a way of collecting ideas. Third, they used it to develop ideas of others to improve their own thinking. And finally, they used it to challenge ideas of their own and that of others – peers and instructors -- with the goal of arriving at a more complete understanding, which leads to

higher level of performance. Therefore, learning through discussions can encourage holistic thinking and understanding when students start challenging their own ideas and beliefs, leading to a higher level of performance and a higher quality of understanding. Figure 1 illustrates the categories of approaches to learning through discussions.
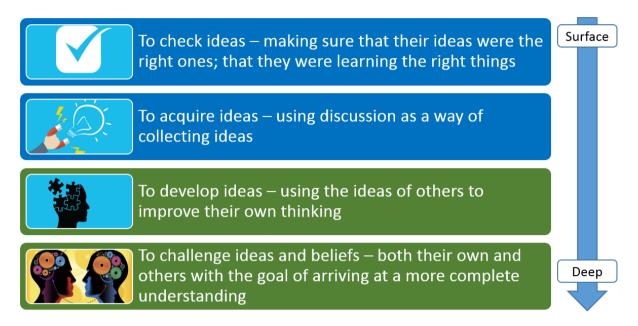

Figure 1: Categories of approaches to learning through discussions.
Adapted from Ellis, R. A., Goodyear, P., Prosser, M., and O'Hara, A. (2006)

The concept of transactivity is the backbone of learning through discussions. Berkowitz and Gibbs (1983) describe transactive discussion as a "reasoning that operates on the reasoning of another." The concept of transactivity is the DNA of effective collaborative learning and relies mainly on how students:

- articulate new ideas,
- build reasoning together,
- develop on an idea expressed while being open to others' perspectives (peers and instructors)
- arrive at a shared understanding

However, this requires significant scaffolding that needs to be provided by peers and instructors, or experts, so as improve student learning. Learning occurs when students share their prior knowledge and participate in conversations with others. In an online discussion forum, students are encouraged to analyse their experiences and opinions, discover their own ideas and solutions. It also gets them to reflect on their own and their peers/instructors postings to evaluate them, challenge the key ideas that are being discussed, build upon them, and actively construct their own understanding and arguments. Such scaffolds provided helps in supporting and maintaining productive dialogues within the learning community

Discussion Forums: An Overview

Online discussions are a great way of extending classroom discussions and learning by getting students to engage with course materials and readings. A **discussion forum** is one of the most frequently used learning technology tools that supports online discussion. Online discussion forums are an alternative form of communication to in-class, verbal discussion – whether simply to provide variety in the subject, to meet the different needs and preferences of individuals, or to allow students time to reflect on the debate and consider their response before contributing. Forums allow for time-delayed communication and asynchronous learning – anytime, anywhere.

Threads within discussion forums are conversations that begin with a prompt or leading question (called posts). Students can respond to the original posts and can reply to each other's responses. Since response is not immediate, it allows participants to process the information and reflect on it before they respond. Thus, the strength of discussion forums lies in the promotion of knowledge construction through peer interaction and idea generation/sharing leading to in-depth reflection and thoughtful responses. Student participation in online discussion forums develops students' skills in using online communication tools.

Strengths of using discussion forums
- Promote peer learning by viewing and responding to other students' posts and ideas
- Construct knowledge through peer interaction and idea sharing
- Encourage thoughtful responses and in-depth reflection
- Build class community and achieve social interaction
- Develop critical thinking and writing skills

Online Discussions: Designing activities

Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework can be a very useful approach to designing online discussion-based activities (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000). Core of the CoI framework is its collaborative constructivist approach to teaching and learning and is based on facilitating deep and meaningful learning. The framework has three interdependent structural elements —social, cognitive and teaching presence. To promote effective interaction and a deep, meaningful learning experience amongst students in the class, discussion activities need to be planned based on one of the three elements of the CoI framework – (1) **Social presence** that will encourage students to present their individual personalities/profiles, help them identify with the community, communicate purposefully and function comfortably in a trusted environment; (2) **Cognitive presence** that will get students to introduce factual, conceptual, and theoretical knowledge into the discussion and be able to construct/confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse; and (3) **Teaching presence** to provide necessary facilitation of the learning process through effective discussion. Forums can be used for content-related discussions, planning of tasks, and/or social support. The learning activities designed for using discussion forums should align with the intended learning outcomes of your course.

Figure 2 provides an illustration of how the three elements of the CoI framework play a key part in the designing of an online discussion-based activity.
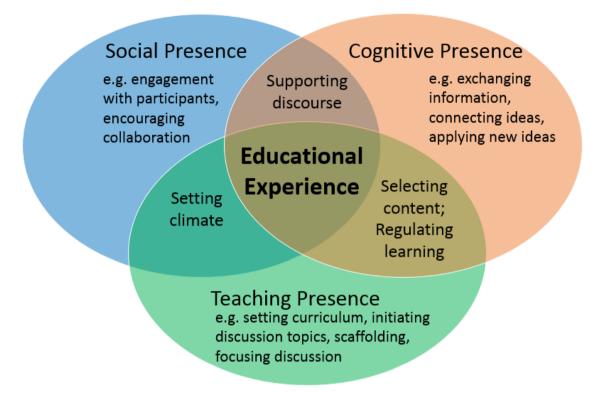

Figure 2: CoI framework for designing online discussions
Adapted from Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000)

Online discussion forums can be used to:

1. **Demonstrate knowledge of key concepts (Use structured discussion topics)**
   Students can prepare for class activities by engaging in online discussions that are designed to have students get familiar with key concepts and new topics. For example, students can discuss their responses to a pre-class reading. Such use of structured discussion topics on the key concepts learnt allows for a focused development of discussion threads led by the facilitator or appointed moderator and facilitates instructor-learner communication. This type of discussion presents a standard format with established boundaries of (a) presence of a weekly discussion question, (b) prescribed participation, and (c) presence of a moderator. In structured discussions, the instructor provides the topic for discussion, linked to what was happening in the course and effectively setting the discussion agenda and the parameters of how broad the discussion would be.

2. **Stimulate higher order critical thinking skills**
   Use clear, open-ended questions that tap into the higher-order thinking levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation to start conversation threads. Questions can range from those that require students to – (1) analyze issues and provide personal reaction to issues, (2) analyze, predict, and explore alternative solutions to problems, (3) comparative analysis before proposing a solution, (4) clarify, explore alternative paths, and answer the question "so what?"

In order to support a deep and meaningful dialogue, the initial discussion questions need to be interesting – perhaps even controversial – and allow for multiple perspectives that your students can provide from their own experience. When students have responded to the initial posts and are familiar with the environment, then encourage them to move into more challenging discussions by adding challenging follow-up questions, scenarios and examples.

3. **Encourage peer interaction and team work (Use groups)**
   Divide your students into small groups of 4-6, using the class groups, tutorial groups, project groups or section groups. The small size makes it easier for all students to participate. Such groups can conduct their own in-depth discussion as a part of a class-wide topic or a topic in its entirety. They could then post their response(s) to the discussion forum which is open to the whole class. Assigning students to a specific workgroup for the duration of the course and giving them the opportunity to participate in various roles during the term — coordinator, time manager, and reporter, for instance, would give the students a good learning experience.

4. **Promote thoughtful reflection**
   Design activities that require students to provide thoughtful responses that build upon the original posts of the instructor or peers, suggesting new ideas for further research or making interesting connections that the author did not see. Allow time for students to analyze and synthesize so that discussions can build over time, or over the duration of the course, thus providing time for in-depth thinking and reflection on a given topic.

5. **Achieve social interaction and community building**
   Create discussion threads that will allow students get to know each other personally and intellectually, and build a community of learners.

6. **Encourage student-generated discussion topics**
   Encourage student-generated topics as they will increase motivation and support a learner- centered environment. Depending on your classroom dynamics, you might consider providing an alternative space for very informal discussion/conversation of general questions – a virtual coffee shop, for example.

When designing activities, ponder over the following:

- The purpose of the online discussion—"Why do I want to use discussion forum?"
- The questions—open-ended where there may be more than one possible answer or opinion, ill-structured problems or issues
- Alignment—How do the ideas and information to be discussed fit into the module as a whole?
- Knowledge & skills—What skills, knowledge, or perspectives, do you want your students to gain from the discussions?
- Preparing students—Demo to students in class what it means for participating in discussions (if necessary) – e.g. warm up activities in class

Planning an online discussion activity

You can use the following worksheet to plan an online discussion-based activity

Activity Sheet: Planning your online discussion activity

Think about the following:
   -   Learning objectives that you would like to achieve through this activity
   -   Design of the activity (based on your purpose)
   -   Grading criteria, if any
   - Students' role + Your role	

The topic of the discussion forum: _____	
Learning Objective	After participating in this discussion forum, students will be able to:
Design	My students will be apply and/or practice the material from: My in-class activity/lecture in preparation will be:
Instructions for Students	Guidelines and Instructions for students:
	How many postings should students reply to: When replying, do the following:
Grading Criteria	Grading Scale:
	An excellent answer will include:
	An acceptable answer will include:
My role	I will give feedback by:

Adapted from: Bender, T. (2003) "Discussion-Based Online Teaching To Enhance Student Learning". Stylus Pub. Virginia

As you start planning, it would be good to think of activities that can engage students range in both low-level (surface learning) and high-level (deep learning) activities:

Online Discussion Activities Aligned to Bloom's Taxonomy

Learning Outcome	Learning activities using Discussion Forum
Remember: Recall facts and key concepts, discover, observe, list, locate	• Students work in small groups to locate and compile a list of useful resources/readings on a given topic area. These resources are then shared on the discussion forum with the class. • Students to share links to lesson plans on given topics.
Understand: Explain ideas or concepts, understand, summarise, discuss, demonstrate,	• Students research on a particular topic, and discuss the points on topics listed, reply to questions, and post a summary • Based on pre-readings, students outline the points discussed.
Apply: Use knowledge /information in new ways/situations, manipulate, design, experiment, problem solving	• Working in pairs, students design a customized online lesson for each other on a topic of their choice related to the course content. These are posted for feedback and discussion. • Working in groups, students create and share a multimedia presentation illustrating practical application of the concepts discussed in class for further discussion. • Student chooses a problem from an assigned list and offers three potential solutions and peers provide feedback and suggestions to improve the solutions.
Analyse: Draw connections among ideas, organise ideas, recognise trends, identify and analyse patterns, breaks down	• Students listen to audio recordings and write a comparison of points of discussion. The comparison is posted for discussion • Students review/evaluate software for ease of use and other properties related to the use in the classroom or online teaching environment.
Evaluate: Justify a stand or decision, assess theories, recommend, compare and contrast, justify, reframe	• Each student keeps a two-column reflective journal on course readings and new learning, thoughts and questions. These journals are periodically posted and replied to by other students and the instructor.
Create: Produce new/original work, infer, modify,	• Students brainstorm ideas for a class project. Students then respond by sharing resources, topics, and build on other's ideas. • Every student generates one unique question based on a course reading and answers to at least three other questions. Students will be graded on the quality of their question as well as their posted answers.

Adapted from Lisa Dawley (2007), The Tools for Successful Online Teaching

Managing Online Discussions

Instructors who are new to using online discussions often wonder:
- When and for what will an online discussion be useful?
- How do I get the students actively involved in online discussions?
- How do I keep my students engaged in these discussions?
- Is there an acceptable delay before one can expect replies to a question?
- How long should I wait before I interfere in a discussion?

When facilitating and managing online discussions, it is important to strike a balance in your interaction to make the forum focus on learning issues while keeping it interesting. Students may value online discussions if it increases the level of confidence to actively engage in extended discussions and debate, and can interest them to pursue ideas beyond the 'boundaries' of the module itself. The first time you start using a discussion forum would demand more of your time when compared to your subsequent attempts. You can manage your discussion forum by:
- **Setting clear expectations** about online discussion requirements, deadlines, and grading process. Using rubrics will allow students to have a clear guideline of your expectations for quality of their posts. Provide a good, well-thought structure for students to post to threads.
- **Identifying the goals** for asking students to participate in online discussions. For example, you can use it to – prepare for in-class discussion, extend in-class discussion outside of class, bring in new resources, identify key concepts in course readings, understand students' personal opinions on a particular subject
- **Communicating the goals** to students by including them in the discussion prompts. It will be good to have specific goals for each online discussion assignments
- **Providing a schedule** for students of upcoming deadlines, give as much notice as possible.
- **Taking time to induct students to the forums during the first two weeks**
  Be prepared to spend some time during the first week helping students access and navigate the forum. Do not expect all your students to be successfully reading and participating in the first week of the term.
- **Participating in the discussion**s and make yourself visible. Students will be more willing to participate and engage in discussions if they see instructors being a part of it. If students are dominating the discussion, privately ask them to slow down a little.
- **Preempting questions**
  Make regular announcements or provide relevant text and readings to the module.
- **Setting aside specific times to monitor/ respond to the postings**
  This can help you to plan how much time you will take to respond to posts. Logging in more than once a day can be ineffective as there may not be any new contributions to read while waiting several days may result in an overwhelming number of discussion contributions to read. Responding (where necessary) within 24 hours is one way to demonstrate faculty presence in the module.
- **Developing an FAQ section**
  Supplement your module with an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section and regularly update this section throughout the semester as you receive individual questions of relevance from students.

Creating Thoughtful Online Discussions: Example Prompts

Thoughtful discussion is one that is overflowing with thoughts, ideas and concepts. An online discussion platform is ideal for exploring complex ideas and debating on multiple perspectives, and is not suited for reaching a single solution

Example Prompt 1:

For each topic in the course (use the appropriate heading to post your comments), write one post to show what you have learned and what you understand from the lectures and course readings, as well as from the ongoing online discussions. Your post should also write about how this new learning might influence your thoughts and actions at home and in the larger community around you.

Example Prompt 2:

The forum is graded on a weekly basis, and your overall discussion forum grade is an average of the individual week's grades (based on that week's threads) you receive for the forum.

Each lesson contains two or three prompts that are connected to that lesson's learning outcomes. In addition to responding to these prompts, you should engage in the forum by initiating posts and responding to the posts of others in ways that advance the conversation. You might, for instance:

- Post an opinion based on reading/research you do on the topic.
- Respond thoughtfully to a topic from your own experience.
- Thoughtfully rebut another participant's comments.
- Provide links and resources related to the topic that would be of interest to your peers.
- Pose a thought-provoking question related to the topic.
- Provide an alternate perspective to the one currently dominating the discussion.
- Synthesize the current class discussion by summing up arguments in the discussion.

Example Prompt 3:

Each student will contribute to the weekly class discussion, posting an approximately 500 word response to the week's readings. There are a number of ways to approach these open-ended posts: consider the reading in relation to its historical or theoretical context; write about an aspect of the day's reading that you don't understand, or something that jars you; formulate an insightful question or two about the reading and then attempt to answer your own questions; or respond to another student's post, building upon it, disagreeing with it, or rethinking it. In any case, strive for thoughtfulness and nuance. To ensure that everyone has a chance to read the posts before class, post your response by midnight the evening before class.

(This example is adapted from "Pedagogy and the Class" Blog by Mark Sample, Davidson College, 2008/2009).

Example Prompt 4:

1. Submit multimedia presentation: Please upload your multimedia presentation to the Students submission folder.

2. Discussion Activity: View your assigned peer's presentation. Do a review of the presentation based on the rubric provided (you can download the rubric from IVLE course materials). Provide feedback on areas identified and provide suggestions for improvement. Post your comments on the IVLE forum. The instructor/tutor will review your feedback and give final comments in the forum.

Example Prompt 5:

1. Write one content post (750 words, excluding refs). Deadline 24 Sep
    This is an individual research paper on any topic about Japan. Post the essay to the IVLE Discussion Forum. You may choose any topic that interests you, as long as it can be researched in an academic way. Provide background to the topic, including any controversies surrounding it, and explain the relevance of the topic to the module. Include references and/or links to external content (journal articles, books, newspaper or magazine articles). You will be marked on writing style, creativity, content, and academic quality. Remember, you must analyze and synthesize, not copy or simply rephrase the work of others. Late work will not be accepted.

2. At least two response posts (no word limit). Deadline 24 Oct
    Respond to at least two other students' content posts. These should be thoughtful responses that build upon the original posts of others (not your own), suggesting new ideas for further research or interesting connections that the author did not see. You may write as many response posts as you like, but two excellent posts are sufficient. Responses can be posted to the Discussion Forum. Late posts will not be accepted.

(This example is from "Introduction to Japanese Studies" by Chris McMorran, National University of Singapore, 2014/2015)

Example Prompt 6:

1. In-class group activity - One Summary post per group (Deadline: 26 Aug)
    In your assigned class groups, discuss on the different issues related to the topic discussed in class during third week. Summarise the key points of your group's discussion. Select a group representative who will post your group's summary to the discussion forum

2. Discussion activity (Individual) – At least 2 response posts (Deadline: 16 Sep)
    Respond to at least two other group's inputs or comments, and your personal thoughts

Example Prompt 7:

1. You will need to submit your first draft proposal by posting it on the IVLE Forum. (<u>Deadline: week 3</u>)

2. Read and critically review at least <u>three</u> draft proposals submitted by your peers. Post your response to the 3 identified draft proposals. Your reviews should be thoughtful responses that build upon the original proposal, suggesting ideas to further refine their research questions or identify interesting connections that the author did not see. Once your proposal is reviewed by three of your peers, facilitators and tutors will provides feedback and suggestions to improve on the proposal.

3. Please incorporate your peer's and facilitator's feedback to refine your proposal. You will need to submit the first two sections (sections 1 & 2) of your revised paper proposal through the Students Submissions available in the IVLE Workbin. You will be paired up to review one of your peer's work. Please take the time to read instructions provided on how you can perform an effective peer review. After you have peer reviewed your assigned peer's paper, submit it back into the Students Submissions section. The instruction sheet is made available in your course materials. (<u>Deadline: week 7</u>)

4. Please submit your final assignment (1,000 – 2,000 word essay) through the Students Submission section of the IVLE workbin (<u>Deadline: week 3</u>)

(This example is adapted from "Linguistic Argumentation" by K P Mohanan, National University of Singapore, 2007/2008)

Other examples of using online discussions include:

- Having an **FAQ forum** for students to ask and answer questions about the course.
- Discussions around particular topics or current events related to course concepts.
- Threaded discussions around assigned readings – may include pre-reading (anticipation) activities, interpretations, evaluations, reflections on course readings and lectures in relation to personal experiences.
- Having a "**Research Bank**" forum where students and instructor contribute links and citations to a common area for a class wide research topic.
- Feedback dialogue on a student writing assignment draft.
- Discussions around collaborative work such as an ongoing problem-based learning activity, or a wiki.

Assessing Online Discussions

- Include the assessment criteria in the course. This can be included either in the Syllabus, Course announcement, and/or Instructions for online discussions

- Establish clear criteria for posts; e.g., share models or a rubric with the students. Using a grading rubric can help to ensure that evaluation is consistent. Students can also do self and peer assessments on their own and their classmate's contributions. Make sure the criteria measure both quality and quantity

- When assessing online discussions, it may be important to consider if your students:
  - helped solve a problem?
  - lend support to peers?
  - challenged an idea?
  - offered some alternatives?
  - came up with a creative solution?
  - asked good questions?
  - assisted in clarifying peers' ideas?
  - explained their points well?
  - respected other opinions?
  - shared good examples?
  - provided examples from your personal experience?
  - contributed solid evidence to support their opinion?
  - acknowledged and affirmed a peer's ideas?
  - brought a derailing dialogue/conversation back on track?
  - dominated the discussion or remained too silent?

- Provide feedback/comments on the quality of student posts even if the participation does not count to their grades. For example highlight good examples in class or online. You can archive student contributions for a later review or for showcasing them with a next batch of students taking the course.

- Check in with students to see how they experienced the online discussion. You can do this by asking students to respond anonymously to a couple of questions such as: What about participating in this online discussion worked well for you? What are one or two things that if done differently may have made the online discussions more effective?

Discussion Forum: Recommended best practices

1. **Create forums for specific topics**
   Create dedicated forums for specific topics to reduce cognitive overload and to keep online discussions focused. You could create a general discussion forum (e.g., "FAQs", "Help!") for students to post general questions that they may have about the course or even a social forum (e.g., "Student Lounge") for off-topic discussions. Answering the questions in this public discussion forum allows other students to benefit from the responses, eliminates the duplication of email responses, and makes it possible for students to help one another. Make discussion forums available as needed rather than making them all available at the beginning of the course.

2. **Create a schedule of when you will monitor/ respond to the postings**
   Helps you to plan how much time you will take to respond to posts. Logging in more than once a day can be ineffective as there may not be any new contributions to read while waiting several days may result in an overwhelming number of discussion contributions to read. Responding where necessary within 24 hours is one way to demonstrate instructor presence in the module.

3. **Don't plan to respond to all postings**
   Only respond to those posts that are directed to you, or if your response will contribute to the quality of the discussion.

4. **Model expectations when writing your responses**
   Ensure that the quality and length of your posts are those you expect of your students.

5. **Post a summary/feedback comment**
   Consider posting a summary or feedback comment when the discussion has been going for a few days. You could also rephrase the question if the discussion goes off the topic.

6. **Specify due dates for required contributions**
   If participation or student contributions in an online discussion are required, include the due dates for initial posts and responses in the description.

7. **Don't remove past discussion forums**
   Students may want to review past discussions as they proceed through the course. Simply reorder the forums so that current forums are near the top.

8. **Save discussion threads for viewing offline**
   You could save all discussion threads or specific topics in a forum to read student contributions offline. These can then be printed or saved for offline viewing.

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