

Rethinking Discussion Boards

Overview

Discussion boards are often used as a way to facilitate conversation and encourage engagement for asynchronous, hybrid, and even traditional face-to-face courses. Many of us are used to the common pattern of posting a prompt, asking students to respond with their own original post, and expecting replies to x number of classmates' posts. This structure, however, can leave much to be desired for both the faculty and students. Discussion boards are intended to stimulate conversation, but instead, they end up feeling forced and painful. In order to change that, we can think about how we are structuring discussion boards/forums.

Ideas

Below are some tips and suggestions to consider when rethinking how to use discussion boards in your courses.

1. Rethink how you grade discussion boards.

While this may seem a bit scary, think about the purpose of the discussion board - which is to stimulate and advance conversation and thinking. Instead of grading based on a student posting one original post and then 2-3 replies to others, consider grading based on original thoughts and advancements to the conversation. That is, the student's contribution to the discussion would be evaluated based on (a) contributing an original idea and (b) moving the conversation forward by asking questions, prompting for clarification, building on what another student has written, etc. While a student may only post once, their contribution to the discussion could still be rather substantial depending on the quality of the submission. Furthermore, the quality of the posts may be enhanced by being more transparent about what the purpose of the discussion board is and providing criteria meant to enhance the conversation instead of quantify it.

2. Rethink the number of prompts you use.

Instead of only having one prompt which students are required to respond to, provide multiple prompts and give students a choice in the question they respond to. Students could respond to one prompt or all of them; it's their choice. The only criteria are that their contribution is substantial and well-

constructed. Providing choice can increase students' agency. As Flower Darby writes, "The goal is to allow students to engage with topics they find interesting, and then interact with other students who likely wrote about something else of interest. This way there are multiple mini-conversations happening in the forum" (Darby & Lang, 2019, p. 164).

3. Rethink your response prompts.

Instead of asking students to simply respond to each other, ask them to take a deeper dive into their own thinking by carefully examining what others have responded. For example, you could ask students to respond with a post about how their submission compared to other students' and what they may view differently now. Here is an example response prompt: *How is your post similar to others' responses in the class? How is it different? Is there anything that you consider differently now after reading your classmates' submissions?*

Another alternative is to ask them to respond with a higher-level summary of responses. They could categorize the responses, chart comparisons and contrasts, or make a concept map. This can be particularly helpful in a discussion board where students have expressed different viewpoints regarding a topic. It also reminds students that information can be communicated in multiple forms.

4. Rethink the way in which students respond.

Discussion boards rely heavily on writing. However, mixing it up and having students respond with video or imagery can enrich the conversation. Providing multiple ways for students to engage helps the discussion feel less forced. You may not want to do this for every discussion board, but mixing it up every now and then helps keep things fresh. If you do ask students to use video or imagery, just make sure they know how to do so before requiring them to do it (a practice run could help).

5. Rethink your participation in the discussion board.

It can be easy to sit back and let students do all the responding in the discussion forum. However, this isn't likely something we would do in a face-to-face class. That is, we wouldn't ask students to engage in a whole class conversation and then leave the classroom.

In a meta-analysis of online discussion studies, Zhou (2015) found the value and quality of faculty interaction in the forum impacts peer-to-peer interaction. In other words, if you want students to demonstrate quality online interactions,

then you have to model quality online interaction. Furthermore, in a 2019 study by Thompson, Leonard, and Bridier, the authors' findings reinforced previous studies demonstrating that increased, quality interaction between faculty and students in a discussion forum can reduce students' anxiety related to the subject matter - in this study's case, statistics.

6. Rethink feedback.

Instead of only responding within the discussion forum or in the gradebook, consider utilizing whole class feedback to draw out major highlights from the class discussion. To do this, consider writing or recording a summary of the major takeaways from the forum. In your response, you may decide to call out individual students for really insightful comments or contributions. An easy way to do this could be to make a video announcement to close out the unit and/or forum. Posting it as an announcement can help reinforce main points and students can easily access the announcement to rewatch as needed.

References

- Darby, F., & Lang, J. (2019). *Small teaching online: Applying learning science in online classes*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Thompson, C. J., Leonard, L., & Bridier, N. (2019). Online discussion forums: Quality interactions for reducing statistics anxiety in graduate education students. *International Journal of E-Learning and Distance Education*, 34(1). <http://www.ijede.ca/index.php/jde/article/view/1072/1731>
- Zhou, H. (2015). A systematic review of empirical studies on participants' interactions in internet-mediated discussion boards as a course component in formal higher education settings. *Online Learning*, 19(3), 181-200.