

Encouraging Participation in Discussion Forums

Hi! This is Shiao-Chuan Kung with the Education Technologies group of *ICIT*. In this Blackboard tip of the week, I'd like to make several recommendations for using discussion forums in your Blackboard courses. Discussion forums are spaces where informal writing, peer learning and student-led discussions can take place. Some instructors find them to be useful as an alternative format for student participation and a way to gain insight into students' thought processes. Discussion forums can extend communication between instructors and students and among students beyond the confines of the classroom.

Despite their potential benefits, discussion forums can be difficult to manage. Two common challenges are lack of participation and managing large numbers of posts. I'll talk about encouraging participation in this episode. Next week, I'll discuss handling large numbers of posts and the week after that, I'll share with you some ideas about assessing student participation in discussion forums.

My first recommendation to get students to participate is to set clear expectations. In the past, I have tried to continue a vibrant in-class discussion online by saying to the class "This discussion is great. I'm going to set up a discussion forum so that you can share your ideas with each other. Read each other's postings and offer feedback." But I find later that only a couple of students post anything. Even fewer get any replies and the momentum of a great discussion was lost. I realized after a few of these failed attempts that I had not provided enough guidance. I had not justified the use of a discussion board nor set clear expectations.

Now, I set a time frame, specify the content of the postings, approximate lengths, and evaluation criteria. I say something like this. "I want to use the discussion forum in Blackboard to extend the discussion we started in class. Doing it this way will allow you to craft thoughtful responses and to allow all of us to see how this complex question can have many solutions and how your solutions may be refined with the input of your peers. Everyone should formulate a 2-paragraph posting by 5 pm Friday afternoon. By Wednesday before class, please read all the postings and respond to two of them. Your answer should be no more than two paragraphs. You need to formulate a coherent argument for or against the posting you are responding to, offer recommendations and include relevant references. Please do not respond to a posting that already has two replies. (The earlier you start, the more choice you have in which posting you want to respond to.) I'm going to evaluate you on how innovate your solutions are and how you can support your position using the readings we've covered." I not only give these instructions verbally in class but also post them as the first post in the discussion forum.

Besides setting clear expectations, I would recommend thinking through the design of the assignment because it will affect participation in discussion forums. Are you asking students for individual or group work? Are you expecting them to show understanding or create new knowledge? Does participation count towards a grade or not? Is there a

deliverable at the end of the discussion? Your answers to these questions might affect how much interaction occurs on a discussion board. Discussion board assignments where you ask students to list, state, identify or summarize something are less likely to generate as much discussion because they seem to have correct answers. Once the correct answers have been posted, there was less incentive to continue the discussion. An example of a discussion board assignment like this is to ask students to respond to “What do you think are the qualities of a good distance learning student? What does a distance learner need to know and be able to do?” On the other hand, an assignment asking students to give an example, compare and contrast or design something new would be open to more possible responses. Consider an assignment like the following. “Think of an innovative way for one of the teachers below to teach his or her class. Specify the methods, media, and materials that you would recommend this teacher to use.” There would be a few scenarios to choose from and a follow-up activity asking responders to critique and ask questions of the proposed idea. This assignment requires application of material learned and higher-order thinking skills. In my experience, it generated a substantial amount of quality discussions.

Making groups and assigning roles to different team members might also encourage participation. Blackboard lets you create work spaces for small groups of students and make tools such as group file exchange and group discussion boards available to them. Assigning discussions to a small group might keep the conversation more focused because the group members have a limited number of posts to read and to respond to. Giving team members different roles as the fact-checker, timekeeper and summarizer might promote accountability and participation.

We often assume that students know how to use discussion forums because they have the technical know-how. But knowing where to click to post and respond does not necessarily mean knowing how to interact effectively using online communication tools. I would recommend spending some time at the beginning of the semester teaching students how to write good responses. Tell them to practice netiquette, to use clear and informative subject lines, to write brief postings with one central idea, to engage with others by referring to specific people in class and to what they wrote, to pose a question at the end of their posts inviting divergent viewpoints, to check for feedback on their work and to view the discussion forum as a time-delayed conversation with members of the class.

In summary, setting clear expectations, designing assignments that elicit elaborated responses, creating groups with assigned roles, and teaching students effective strategies to interact in discussion boards are all ways to encourage participation.



<http://blogs.hunter.cuny.edu/bbtips/>

I've made links to resources for instructors and for students and examples of instructions on our Blackboard Tip of the Week blog at <http://blogs.hunter.cuny.edu/bbtips/>. Next week, I'll be talking about managing large numbers of posts and the following week about assessing student contribution to discussions.



<http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/icit/trc/workshops/index.shtml>

Please drop by the Technology Resource Center at C104 Hunter North or come to one of our workshops if you have questions about using discussion boards in Blackboard. We currently have two workshops on the topic: Introduction to Communication Tools and Facilitating Online Discussions.

Do you have an idea for a Bb tip? Drop us an email at training@hunter.cuny.edu. Thank you for listening and please join us next time for a new Bb Tip of the Week.

Resources for Instructors

- ❑ Some tips on online discussion using Blackboard
http://www.edtech.new.edu/blackboard/resources/managing/discussion_tips.htm
- ❑ What to watch for when moderating a discussion <http://lone-eagles.com/courses/rfts/facsht.htm>
- ❑ Moderating Discussions in the Electronic Classroom
<http://emoderators.com/moderators/rohfeld.html>
- ❑ Funaro, G.M. & Montell, F. (1999). Pedagogical Roles and Implementation Guidelines for Online Communication Tools. <http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/magazine/v3n2/funaro.asp>
- ❑ Eight Ways to Get Students More Engaged in Online Conferences
<http://thejournal.com/articles/14054>

Resources for Students

- ❑ Writing Good Discussion Comments: Tips for Students.
http://www.edtech.neu.edu/blackboard/resources/managing/discussion_students.htm
- ❑ The Core Rules of Etiquette <http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html>