Effective Discussion Forums

Purpose of Document

The purpose of this document is to provide faculty a resource that illuminates various elements that should be considered when developing solid and effective discussion forums in online classes. This resource provides insight to the concept of online discussions, discussion structures, discussion questions, guidelines, student engagement, and the teacher’s role. Significant research has been conducted to offer the following information and several resources have contributed to this document. The sources are listed at the end including additional resources for further reading.

Total Number of Pages

35

Topics

What is a Discussion Board?
Benefits of Discussion Boards
Preparing for Discussions
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Discussion Question Types
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What is a Discussion Board?

A discussion board is a communication tool used to share messages, which can be questions, responses, comments, or announcements that are accessible to the members of a group. A message (commonly called a "post") can vary in content. A series of messages in response to a topic is called a thread. Discussions are an active learning technique.

A discussion board can be hierarchically divided into categories and forums; this offers an efficient way to organize discussions in support of major topics or areas of interest. Discussion boards are "asynchronous" in nature, meaning that the participants do not participate simultaneously, which is a primary benefit, as content posted to the board can be accessed at any time. Discussion boards support messages containing images, web links, and media file attachments.

Benefits of Discussion Boards

- Students can engage in critical debates, requiring a deeper level of participation than simply listening to a lecture. The textually based nature of the discussion board also makes it easier for students to offer evidence of sustained engagement with class material.
- They can provide a sense of continuity (and community) between scheduled class time.
- They provide an outlet for all class-members to pose questions and receive feedback, not just from the instructor, but also from peers.
- They can provide a more level playing field for shy or ESL (English as a Second Language) students, providing them with a venue in which they can more comfortably articulate their ideas.
- They allow students to share information and references with each other.
- The instructor can provide preparatory materials.
- They represent an archive of discussions useful for later review.

Preparing for Discussions

Articulate and communicate the purpose (not just the topic!) of discussion. Consider both the content you want students to learn and the skills you want them to apply and develop through
the online discussion. Sharing the learning goals will help students understand why you are using discussions and how it will contribute to their learning. These learning goals will inform the strategies and digital tools you use during discussion. Keep in mind:

- What is the purpose of the online discussion?
- What practices will help students accomplish the purpose?
- What would “good” participation look like?

**Discussion Forum Types**

Discussions require deciding the type of academic discussion that best suits the purpose and topic. There are a variety of discussion forum structures that may be utilized. The following will be described with examples below.

- Student Facilitation
- Reflection Forum
- Timeline Collaboration
- Small Group
- Debate
- In the News
- Alternative History
- Video Analysis
- Case Study
- Challenge Questions
- Mixing Up Your Introductions
- Student Showcase

**Student Facilitation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overview</th>
<th>A learner takes on the role of “instructor” to provide feedback for posted responses.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rationale</strong></td>
<td>Student facilitation discussions provide learners an opportunity to do a peer review. It can be set up so the learner/facilitator gets feedback from the instructor on their own responses before learners review their peers. All learners practice the material, and by the end of the course, all learners have an opportunity to provide feedback to their peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When this works well</strong></td>
<td>Courses where learners need to solve problem sets for practice - math, statistics, chemistry, physics, engineering, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example</strong></td>
<td>Each student will facilitate one of the problem sets during the semester.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Connections**         | QM: 5.2, 6.2  
UDL: 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2                                                                 |

**Reflection Forum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Overview</strong></th>
<th>A discussion activity where students can post regular (daily, weekly, etc.) entries to reflect on their learning.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rationale</strong></td>
<td>Reflection is an excellent exercise to develop competence by employing meta-cognitive strategies of diagnostic reasoning, decision making, critical analysis, and self-examination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When this works well</strong></td>
<td>Reflection (reflective practice) would work well to help learners process the alignment of knowledge transfer/learning style to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- What were the 3 (or more) new things you learned this week?  
- What were 2 (or more) things you already knew?  
- What is 1 (or more) thing you are still confused about? |
| **Connections** | QM: 5.2, 6.2  
UDL: 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 6.4, 7.2, 8.2                                                                 |
### Timeline Collaboration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overview</th>
<th>Timelines categorize similar or related events into themes, eras, and topics to help learners compare elements in different time periods.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>Using a timeline approach this discussion asks learners to look back and then use critical thinking to predict the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When this works well</strong></td>
<td>This works well when there is a need to look to the future and prepare for it. This example is based on scientific prototyping which focuses on the interaction of technology and the human experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>Edit the class timeline. Post 3 past events in immersive technologies history on the Class Timeline (use your readings from the last two chapters). Transform your futurist predictions into fictitious &quot;future events&quot; and post your future events on the timeline. Include a visual and textual representation of each event, past and future. The visual can be either an image, video, or animation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Connections                                                              | QM: 4.5, 5.2, 6.2, 6.3  
UDL: 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2                                                                                                        |

### Small Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overview</th>
<th>This models a think / pair / share.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>Provides opportunities for learners to practice with the content in a small group setting before having to “report out” to the entire course. Reduces artifacts to grade as each group produces one final product. Is easily adaptable from smaller questions up through larger projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When this works well</strong></td>
<td>This is a great way to have discussion with larger classes. This works especially well for case studies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example

1. In a small group discussion, create a 2 - 3 paragraph response to the prompt.
2. Post final to the main forum.
3. Ask questions of the other group’s final post.
4. Respond to the question posed to your group.

Connections

QM: 5.2, 5.4, 6.2
UDL: 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2

Debate

Overview

A debate online can be set up between two or more groups or “teams” to argue a subject that is open for discussion.

Rationale

Debates work well to practice skills in critical thinking and is very effective in actively engaging students.

When this works well

- **Leadership Roles** – Useful when students have had limited exposure to varying forms and need exposure to different ideas. Debates allow students to explore what works in particular situations.
- **Interpretation of Literature** – Is an excellent way to tease out multiple interpretations of texts. They are appropriate only for texts which have clearly defined opposing interpretations.
- **Theory** – Good forum for the discussion of differing schools of thought within a discipline. May be very exciting for students to challenge the theoretical conventional wisdom within the structure of formal debate.
- **Ethical Considerations** – May be the best way to explore ideas without controversy, but students may resent the Devil’s Advocate during this more sensitive subject matter. May be
difficult for students to remain objective when topics are emotionally compelling to them.

- **Problem Solving** – Supportive online environment may encourage creative thought and solutions through exploration of topic. Encourages students to practice problem solving techniques in their coursework.

- **Current Events** – Allows students to explore many angles of issues in a non-threatening atmosphere and critique of common judgments will help students be precise in defense of their own beliefs. Encourages students to develop compelling arguments about current, relevant topics.

- **Political Action** – May make students more comfortable expressing “politically incorrect” views. Can create an adversarial atmosphere.

- **Changes Within Discipline** – Students can theorize different possibilities or outcomes for a course of action and develop their own philosophies regarding possible changes. Students become well versed in the directions their field may take or has taken.

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**Discussion Prompt**

Topic: “Affirmative action is necessary to create diversity in Higher Ed institutions.”

Some examples of arguments for and against are listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arguments For</th>
<th>Arguments Against</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equality of opportunity</td>
<td>Achievements should be earned, not given</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Connections | QM: 5.2, 6.2  
UDL: 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2 |
|-------------|--------------------------------|

### In the News

#### Overview

“In the News” discussions use examples from the media that present a statistic. Learners describe the limitations of taking statistics at face-value.

#### Rationale

This activity helps learners to develop critical thinking by examining and researching statistics (or another discipline) in the media to learn “you cannot believe everything you see and hear in the news.”

#### When this works well

The application of statistics in any discipline, but the focus is on evaluating the credibility of the statistical assertion.

#### Example

Locate an article in the news that uses statistics to support a claim.

Describe the limitations of the statistics and what additional information you would want to see or know in order to determine the validity of the statistics.
### Alternate History

| Connections | QM: 4.5, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 6.2  
| UDL: 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2 |

#### Overview

In an alternative history discussion forum, the instructor poses questions to learners like, “What might have happened differently,” or “What if?” to help learners gain an understanding of an event’s significance on the chain of historical occasions contributing to learners’ engagement in discussing past and current conflicts.

#### Rationale

An alternative history discussion helps learners to explore and see important events from multiple perspectives while developing tolerance, conflict resolution, and empathy.

#### When this works well

Alternative history discussions work well in any discipline that studies and analyzes important events that have already occurred.

#### Example

What if the United States had not used the atomic bomb on Japan? What would have been some of the probably immediate effects? How would our world be different today?

**Initial Post Instructions**

Produce a knowledgeable argument that clearly and convincingly answers the discussion question prompt. Include strong evidence and historical information to develop and logically support your argument.

**Reply Instructions**

Provide two alternative perspectives or counterclaim to refute the arguments of your classmates. Replies must include strong evidence and historical information to develop and logically support your alternative perspectives or counterclaims.
### Video Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connections</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>QM:</strong> 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UDL:</strong> 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Overview

A forum that incorporates multimedia with an emphasis on identifying specific aspects presented in the media.

#### Rationale

The ultimate goal of the course was to have learners identify when they as an audiologist needed to refer a patient to a speech-language pathologist. They needed practice. The final exam was ½ video questions - so the forum was formative assessment.

#### When this works well

Soft skills. Identifying characteristics represented in multimedia.

#### Example

- Watch all videos.
- Select one and post a response to include the following:
  - Determine if the individual demonstrates difficulties with voice quality, pitch, loudness, and/or resonance.
  - Include information from the textbook or other resources that helped you decide.
  - Identify at least two characteristics evidenced in the video that support your answer to #1.

**Reply Instructions**

Respond to two of your classmates and expand upon their responses by Wednesday at 11:59 PM PST. You are strongly encouraged to respond to a post for a video other than the one you posted about.

- Were there additional characteristics you identified?
- Why do you agree or disagree with their interpretation? (Be sure to include supporting evidence.)
### Case Study

| Connections | QM: 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 6.2  
UDL: 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2 |
|-------------|----------------------------|

#### Case Study

**Overview**

Case study requires learners to read a “real-life” case and then answer, discuss, or argue open-ended questions, “What would you do in this situation?” or to develop solutions with accompanying data to analyze. Case assignments can be done individually or in teams so that the learners can brainstorm solutions and share the workload.

**Rationale**

A major advantage of teaching with case studies is that the learners actively engage in figuring things from the examples. This develops skills in problem-solving, analytical skills (quantitative and/or qualitative), decision making, and coping with ambiguities.

**When this works well**

Case study works well in settings where there are “real-world” situations to explore and apply learning.

#### Initial Post

Carefully read through the Social Work Case Study and answer the following questions in the discussion forum. To help answer questions for the case study, refer to Social Work: Policy and Legal Frameworks.

**Discussion Questions:**

- What are you thinking? What is worrying you?
- What is the first thing you are going to do or say?
- How do you ensure that Vicky is kept safe and still respect her wishes and feelings? Do you have any right to intervene?
- Where/from whom could you seek help?
- What next?

#### Reply Post
Provide to two of your classmates. Replies must include strong evidence from Social Work: Policy and Legal Frameworks to develop and logically support your alternative perspectives or counterclaims.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connections</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QM: 4.5, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 6.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>UDL: 3.3, 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2</td>
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</table>

**Challenge Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenge questions forums are mini case studies, presenting a short scenario and asking, “How would you handle this situation?” Think of a “drill” exercise. The instructor can set up the forum where they pose the question and learners reply with their solution or how they would handle the situation. Other learners can reply or comment on the replies of their classmates.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rationale</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This type of discussion forum presents a scenario based on a situation that learners could encounter in the “real world” and develops skills in thinking “on the fly” problem-solving, and decision making and rationalizing decisions.</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>When this works well</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenge questions are similar to case studies where this exercise explores and applies knowledge/skill to “real-world” situations, but in smaller/&quot;micro&quot; situations.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overview</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Challenge Questions Forum, you will read and reply to &quot;challenge questions&quot; related to [topic or subject].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The purpose of the Challenge Questions Forum is to give you an opportunity to apply what you are learning in the course to challenging situations you may encounter as a [profession] and to interact with...
your colleagues by sharing ideas, making suggestions, and asking further questions.

**Goals**

The Challenge Questions Forum aligns with the following course goals:

- Objective 1
- Objective 2
- Objective 3

**Time**

The time estimated to complete the Challenge Questions Forum is [X] hours.

**Instructions**

Starting on [Week X/ Module X] of the course and ending on [Week X/ Module X], I will post a new challenge question [day of the week] for a total of [X] challenge questions.

Read the posted challenge question. Reflect on how you would answer the question. Post your reply to at least [X] questions. (Note, you are not required to answer every posted question.) The more you practice, however, the more you will experience “real-life” situations encountered by [profession].

Read and reply to at least [X] of your classmates’ posts with input, suggestions, or further questions.

**Completion**

To successfully complete the Challenge Questions Forum, you must post an initial reply to at least [X] challenge questions, reply to at least [X] classmates’ two colleague posts (overall, not for each question).
## Mixing Up Your Introductions

### Overview
Mixing Up your Introductions offers different ways to conduct learner introductions in an online course, such as anonymous polling of the class and reporting the results, posting an intro video, creating an infographic to introduce yourself, or just asking simple questions about the learners.

### Rationale
Mixing Up Your Introductions adds variety to course introductions, which can help learners in unexpected ways by helping them feel more connected to their online classroom community.

### When this works well
Introductions at the beginning of the course are important to building community in an online environment. This is especially important if learners will be working in groups on course assignments.

### Example
For this one, we have listed a number of different prompts you could use to begin to create social presence in your class.

**Initial Post Ideas**

- Poll the class anonymously then have the class comment on the results of the poll.
- Post an introduction video.
- Create an infographic to introduce yourself.
- If you were a math problem what would you look like?
- Share your power song.
- What 3 topics (and why) would you want to organically debate each week outside our discussion requirements?
- Show a picture of yourself as a baby.
- Imagine you are 25 years into the future, what advice would your future self give your fellow classmates?
| Connections | QM: 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 6.2  
UDL: 3.3, 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reply Ideas</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
- Find a connection.  
- Ask the person to tell you more about something they mentioned.  
- Try to guess the lie your classmates posted. |

## Student Showcase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overview</th>
<th>Student Showcase forums work in conjunction with a major course assignment. Learners upload the project they want to showcase (video, image/infographic, audio recording, etc.) with a description or introduction. The other learners provide constructive feedback.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>Provides an opportunity for learner-learner active engagement in a course. Provides an opportunity for learners to “show off” their project, allowing them to practice giving and receiving constructive feedback and using it to improve their work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When this works well</td>
<td>This type of forum works well in courses where there is a major creative project that learners can share with their peers and get their feedback or reaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example

**Initial Post Instructions**

**Post Instructions:** Showcase your History project masterpiece by sharing it with the rest of the class.

**Reply Instructions:** Provide helpful/constructive feedback to the showcases of your classmates. Your feedback should provide enough detail so the student showing their work can use it to make improvements to their project.

**Connections**

QM: 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 6.2, 6.3
UDL: 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2

Other discussion forum types include a Noticeboard forum for announcements, a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) forum for questions, and an Assignment Forum where students can ask questions and discuss assignments.

**Discussion Question Characteristics**

Strategic questioning can be used to help facilitate classroom discussions. Strategic questions can open listeners to other points of view as new information and/or possibilities are considered.

A strategic question has the following 7 characteristics.

1. **Creates motion**—asking dynamic rather than static questions can help students explore how they can move on an issue, or get unstuck when discussing a particularly challenging topic
2. **Creates options**—moving away from binary thinking and instead questioning, considering, or including all options, which may also lead to students creating new options
3. **Digs deeper**—using long-lever rather than short-lever questions to stir students’ creative solutions
4. **Avoids “whys”**—including “why” questions often force students into defensiveness of an existing decision, rationalization of the present, or resistance to change
5. **Avoids “yes” or “no” answers**--using closed questions are dead ends for conversations, and encourage passive and uncreative states

6. **Is empowering**--creating confidence that motion, or change, can actually happen and confidence in the students that they have a contribution to make and can create a path for change

7. **Asks the unaskable**--challenge the values and assumptions that the discussion rests upon, in a non-partisan and non-embarrassing way, to probe for more suitable answers for the future

### Discussion Question Types

The process of strategic questioning has two levels to be covered in a specific sequence, and each has its own types of questions. Draft open-ended questions that inspire a range of answers. Consider prompts that ask students to engage in specific actions (e.g., find, compare, explain, identify, connect).

#### Level 1: Describing the Issue or Problem

Purpose: Gain the facts and points of view of all the main players before framing strategic questions.

**Focus Questions**

- What aspects of X concern you?
- What do you think about X?
- How has the X impacted you?
- What are you most concerned about for X?

**Observation Questions**

- What do you see?
- What do you hear?
- What have you heard and read about this situation?
- Which sources do you trust and why?
- What effects of this situation have you noticed in people, in the earth?
- What do you know for sure and what are you not certain about?
Analysis Questions

- What do you think about?
- What are the reasons for X?
- What is the relationship of X to Y?

Feeling Questions

- What sensations do you have in your body when you think or talk about this situation? (examples: muscle tension, racing heart, stomach upset, clenched jaw, euphoria, lightness, sense of peace)
- How do you feel about the situation?
- How has the situation affected your own physical or emotional health?

Level 2: Strategic Questions That Dig Deeper

Purpose: Synthesize and create new information. Move on from what is known into what could be.

Visioning Questions

- How would you like it to be?
- What is the meaning of this situation in your own life?

Change Questions

- How could the situation be changed for it to be as you would like it?
- What will it take to bring the current situation towards the ideal?
- What exactly needs to change here?
- How might these changes come about? Name as many as possible.
- Who can make a difference?
- What changes have you seen or read about?
- How did those changes come about?

Considering Alternatives

- What are all the ways you can think of that would accomplish these changes?
• How could you reach that goal? What are other ways?
• Be sure to tell me if other ideas come up.

**Considering Consequences**

• How would your first alternative affect the others in your group?
• What would be the effect of using X?
• How would you feel doing (name each alternative)?
• What would be the political effect if you did X?

**Considering Obstacles**

• What would need to change for alternative X to be done?
• What keeps you from doing X?
• What prevents you from getting involved?

**Personal Inventory**

• What would it take for you to participate in the change?
• What do you like to do that might be useful in bringing about these changes?
• What aspects of the situation interest you the most?
• What support would you need to work for this change?

**Personal Action**

• Who do you need to talk to?
• How can you join a group that is working on this?
• How can you get others together to work on this?
Instructor-Led and Student-Led Discussions

The most common discussion type is a content discussion is either instructor-led or student-led.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Instructor-led</th>
<th>Student-led</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional discussion in which instructor creates and/or asks most questions and expects students to answer.</td>
<td>Discussion in which students create and ask most questions and students answer, while instructor facilitates/monitors.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pros</td>
<td>Less prep time required; easier to ensure that the discussion addresses specific, desired content; can be less structured.</td>
<td>Student-centered; more student talk; more equitable participation; intrinsic motivation feelings of mastery, autonomy, and connectedness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>Instructor-centered; more “teacher talk” so teacher voice can dominate discussion; can lead to a conversation between the instructor and a few extroverted students; can be more challenging to measure/grade participation.</td>
<td>More planning to design activity to ensure students are guided and on-task as they take the lead; some traditional instructors may feel uncomfortable allowing students to take a structured lead; students may not perform as effective discussion-leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Uses</td>
<td>Discussions that need experienced leadership, ungraded discussions, and spontaneous discussions.</td>
<td>Teaching the skill of discussion leading, making students more responsible for their learning, developing student leadership skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Student-Led Discussion Recommendations**

A student-led discussion is an active learning technique in which an individual, or a pair of students, is assessed by the instructor on their ability to conduct a class discussion on an academic topic relevant to the course.

Some benefits of student-led discussions include cognitive stimulation, skill development, finding his/her personal voice, building confidence, increasing participation and fostering interaction.

**Facilitation Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Instructor models effective discussions.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor introduces expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student leaders prepare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During</td>
<td>Student leaders direct discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student audience contributes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor facilitates and scores leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td>Instructor closes and offers comments.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor provides student leaders feedback and grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommended Steps for Student-Led Discussions** (with attention to co-led discussions)

- In the syllabus, set up discussions as graded assignments required of all students, and indicate how discussions address course objectives.
- Decide whether leading a discussion will carry more points (as an actual assignment) than participating in one (for just a participation grade).
• If students will be co-leading a discussion, decide if you want both members to receive the same grade, or an individual score.
• Decide if you will create the weekly discussion topics per course objectives and themes, or if students have the freedom/ability to select their own topics. If students select their own topics, make sure you take time to clarify and approve their topics.
• Have students sign up to be weekly discussion leaders. Guide them to choose a week convenient for their schedules and matching a particular topic of interest for them.
• If students will be co-leading a discussion, create partners and provide a signup sheet. Then advise students to get to know each other and coordinate schedules and roles for preparing their discussion.
• Establish requirements for expected discussion leader preparation and behavior by using a scoring rubric. Make the rubric available to students before the assignment (i.e. before they lead the discussion).
• If students will be co-leading a discussion and will receive the same grade, make sure the rubric indicates a requirement of demonstrating equal preparation and division of leadership.
• If students have selected their own topics, make sure a requirement on the rubric indicates that the selected topic demonstrated a connection to course objectives and themes.
• Consider making it a requirement on the rubric for discussion leaders to provide 1-3 relevant resources/source in addition to the assigned course readings and existing course materials on the topic.
• During the first class or week, model discussion-leading for the students by leading a discussion you feel follows the requirements you will be looking for from them.
• Debrief the discussion directly after by soliciting from students the 3 things the discussion leaders did particularly well, and the 3 things they could improve for next time.
• Thank the discussion leaders and remind them to post/distribute any additional resources they have contributed.

Participation Guidelines and Netiquette

Articulate participation expectations. Specify what students should include in online contributions, the number of contributions you expect, the types of interactions (e.g., students direct their responses to you, or students must interact with each other, they are required to build on the information shared by peers), the language/terms students should use, the writing
style you expect (e.g., including references or more informal conversation), and when students are expected to contribute.

**Share the criteria that will be used to evaluate discussions.** Identify and communicate the elements of a quality contribution and how students’ contributions will be evaluated. Consider using a rubric to help your students understand the requirements of the discussion.

**Netiquette** - Online discussions are successful when netiquette is defined up front. The following offers sample discussion netiquette:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Our primary commitment is to learn from each other. We acknowledge differences amongst us in backgrounds, skills, interests, and values. We realize that it is these very differences that will increase our awareness and understanding through this process.  
• Take responsibility for the quality of the discussion.  
• If responding or reacting to a statement by another student, indicate by name the student whom you are referencing. |
| Make a single point each time you speak, rather than making a series of statements at once.  
• Start your statement with a short one-sentence summary of the point you are making.  
• Consider anything that is said/written in class strictly confidential. We want to create an atmosphere for open, honest exchange. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Recognize others’ rights to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from your own.  
• Support good ideas that other people have, even if they are different from your own.  
• Challenge one another but do so respectfully.  
• Know tone is a powerful communicator. |
| • Make no assumptions about others. |
• Try to see the issue from the other person’s perspective before stating your opinion.
• Speak from your own experience, without generalizing.
• Use “I” statements to state your views. For example, “I notice that when I’m with my friends we pay attention differently” is more constructive than “When you’re with friends you pay attention differently.”

**Inclusivity**

• Consider who gets left out, who is marginalized, under-represented, or erased by particular claims. So, for example, we could say, “That’s an image of an ideal family,” or we could say, “That may be an image of an ideal family for many middle-class white heterosexuals.”
• Recognize and remember that we have different backgrounds.

• Know that it is okay to be emotional about issues and to name those emotions.
• It’s OK to ask a question that you think may be unsophisticated or uninformed.
• If you are offended by something, or think someone else might be, speak up.

**Constructiveness**

• Criticize ideas, not individuals or groups.
• Commit to learning, refrain from being defensive.
• Build on one another’s comments; work toward shared understanding.

• Support statements with evidence.
• Refer to the text to support your ideas.
• Ask a question to explore areas of uncertainty or discomfort.

**Maximize Student Engagement**

Clear guidelines, generative models, and flexible visual strategies can make it easier for students to participate in online discussions. As such forums become increasingly associated
with public, civic discourse, beyond the classroom, teaching students to participate in them productively is a worthy goal.

Encourage students to take an active role by:

- generating discussion questions
- responding to peer comments/questions
- bringing in outside readings or experiences
- sharing course-related materials (e.g., articles, video clips, other media)
- relating course topics, make real-life connections to the topics discussed
- forming discussion groups to foster interactions online
- inventing a font-style system with students for indicating types of responses or changes in topic. For example, *italicizing disagreement*, bolding a new argument, or using a particular color for each topic can draw attention to those moments and invite responses.
- allowing students to use their own symbol systems for creating connections. For example, @name for citing a previous speaker, or #topic for indicating a new/existing idea, or emojis 😊

**Sample Rubrics**

The following generic grading rubric may be adapted/edited to suit the specific requirements of your student-led discussion assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Approaching mastery</th>
<th>Attempting mastery</th>
<th>Needs improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>Leaders included a thorough yet concise, introduction of the topic/reading(s). (5 points)</td>
<td>Leaders included a basic overview of the topic/reading(s). (4 points)</td>
<td>Leaders did not include an overview of topic/reading(s) or the overview was too long. (1 point)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions</strong></td>
<td>Leaders prepared a sufficient variety and</td>
<td>Leaders prepared on-topic questions that</td>
<td>Leaders did not prepare questions that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requirement</td>
<td>Approaching mastery</td>
<td>Attempting mastery</td>
<td>Needs improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>number of open-ended, on-topic questions to stimulate a substantial discussion. (10 points)</td>
<td>stimulated some discussion. (8 points)</td>
<td>stimulated much discussion and/or questions were off topic. (6 points)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation and Participation</td>
<td>Leaders facilitated participation so that most classmates contributed to the discussion, and leaders’ own participation was equal. (10 points)</td>
<td>Leaders facilitated participation so that many classmates contributed to the discussion and/or leaders’ own participation was mostly equal. (8 points)</td>
<td>Leaders facilitated participation so that only some classmates contributed to the discussion and/or leaders’ own participation was unequal. (6 points)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 
Comments:

The following generic grading rubric may be adapted/edited to suit the specific requirements of your debates.

**Levels of Performance for AFFIRMATIVE Team**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Grade:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization &amp; Clarity</strong></td>
<td>Completely clear and orderly presentation</td>
<td>Mostly clear and orderly in all parts</td>
<td>Clear in some parts but not overall</td>
<td>Unclear and disorganized throughout</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main arguments and responses are</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Argument</td>
<td>Very strong and persuasive arguments given throughout</td>
<td>Many good arguments given, with only minor problems</td>
<td>Some decent arguments, but some significant problems</td>
<td>Few or no real arguments given, or all arguments given had significant problems</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Cross-Examination and Rebuttal</td>
<td>Excellent cross-exam and defense against Negative team’s objections</td>
<td>Good cross-exam and rebuttals, with only minor slip-ups</td>
<td>Decent cross-exam and/or rebuttals, but with some significant problems</td>
<td>Poor cross-exam or rebuttals, failure to point out problems in Negative team’s position or failure to defend itself against attack</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation Style</td>
<td>All style features were used convincingly</td>
<td>Most style features were used convincingly</td>
<td>Few style features were used convincingly</td>
<td>Very few style features were used, none of them convincingly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Levels of Performance for NEGATIVE Team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Grade:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization &amp; Clarity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Main arguments and responses are outlined in a clear and orderly way.</em></td>
<td>Completely clear and orderly presentation</td>
<td>Mostly clear and orderly in all parts</td>
<td>Clear in some parts but not overall</td>
<td>Unclear and disorganized throughout</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of Argument</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Reasons are given against the resolution.</em></td>
<td>Very strong and persuasive arguments given throughout</td>
<td>Many good arguments given, with only minor problems</td>
<td>Some decent arguments, but some significant problems</td>
<td>Few or no real arguments given, or all arguments given had significant problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of Cross-Examination and Rebuttal</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Identification of weakness in Affirmative team’s arguments and ability to defend itself against attack.</em></td>
<td>Excellent cross-exam and defense against Affirmative team’s objections</td>
<td>Good cross-exam and rebuttal, with only minor slip-ups</td>
<td>Decent cross-exam and/or rebuttal, but with some significant problems</td>
<td>Poor cross-exam or rebuttal, failure to point out problems in Affirmative team’s position or failure to defend itself against attack</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Presentation Style**

*Tone of voice, clarity of expression, precision of arguments all contribute to keeping audience’s attention and persuading them of the team’s case.*

<table>
<thead>
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</table>

**Large Classes**

Very large classes can be broken into smaller, more manageable groups. The same topics provided above can be used for each group, or varied topics can be used if you would like to spur different conversations. Breaking a large class into subsets can help make online conversations more manageable for students, as well as diversify contributions to the whole class.

**What is My Role as the Instructor When Using a Discussion Board?**

- State the purpose of the discussion board.
- Define the level of participation required by students and how that participation will be evaluated.
- Use the syllabus to provide information on discussion board use.
- Declare limits on length of postings (sometimes less is more).
- Declare the level of participation students should expect from you.
- Set the tone for online discussion - Establish an inclusive climate that welcomes and supports contributions from different voices, perspectives, and experiences by establishing online discussion guidelines that communicate expectations for online etiquette.
• Commit to the student-centered discussion. Make the discussion an important part of the learning process. Ensure that students understand that the discussion is a serious academic endeavor, not just a casual conversation.

• Establish a “sanctuary” environment, in which students feel free and safe to explore new ideas and help each other to think through the issues.

• During the discussion, hold your comments and questions unless severe errors require immediate interruption for correction. After the discussion, offer mentoring feedback on the discussion process. The feedback is intended to help the students to conduct a more productive discussion in the future.

• Advise teaching assistants of their responsibilities pertaining to the discussion board.

• Refer to discussion board posts in live class discussion.

• Be present and play an active role in guiding the discussion but let students do most of the contributing. You can do this by modeling contributions, asking questions, using students' names, giving feedback, and affirming student contributions.

• Intervene when necessary. Manage discussion dynamics, make sure all students have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion, ask students to explain or provide evidence to support their contributions, redirect/keep the conversation on track, and revisit discussion guidelines as needed.

• Provide timely feedback. Focus the feedback on the learning and the criteria you identified to evaluate discussion contributions.

• Facilitate discussions. Examples:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZ1J07Ln0Hw&feature=emb_logo
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=oUAnp08ATTI&feature=emb_logo

• Close the Discussion - Bring an online discussion to a close. Give students an opportunity to reflect on and share what they learned. Enlist a few students per discussion to be “discussion wrappers” and ask them to wrap up the discussion by identifying and posting themes, extracting key ideas, or listing questions to explore further.
Resources and Further Readings


Kidder, Lisa C. and Cooper, Mark. Discussion Structures. Idaho State University.


Sherry, Michael B. (Mar 2020). Three strategies for better online discussions. ASCD In Service. Retrieved from https://inservice.ascd.org/three-strategies-for-better-online-discussions/.


