# Facilitating Your Online Discussions

## 1. What is it?

A large amount of online learning is accomplished through the discussion board, specifically using threaded discussions. Therefore, it is important that instructors know how to facilitate meaningful discussion that engages learners and promotes a healthy online community.

First, do you have a discussion board management plan? A management plan is something to consider before the course even starts. What are the parameters for student postings? Second, what will your strategies be in terms of engagement in the discussions?

## 2. Why is it important?

Simply put, **facilitation is helping your students reach their goals** by encouraging them to participate, suggesting ideas or strategies for them to consider, or getting students to reflect on their responses/work. Discussions help to scaffold learners with respect to the development of understanding, multiple perspectives, and negotiation of meaning. In online discussions students:

- Become more active
- Discuss assigned readings
- Reflect on and process concepts in the readings
- Present own viewpoints/ideas
- Consider diverse perspectives
- Interpret peers' postings
- Compare peers' postings with own viewpoints/knowledge

## 3. How to do it?

Effective facilitators need to be adaptive, flexible, and responsive. Below are some tips and tricks to consider as part of your management plan and facilitation strategies.

**When setting up your course:**

- **Student Expectations:** Set clear expectations about online discussion requirements, deadlines, and grading procedures, as applicable.
- **Set Parameters, for your own sanity.** You cannot be in *all* discussions *all* the time. Set parameters for yourself and let students know what they are: "I'll be in the discussions on these days", or, "I'll be in the Discussion 3 times this week".
- **Make good use of your time.** When responding to discussion questions, respond to several postings (or a thread) at once, not each post individually. *"Mike, Alicia and Jaz- it looks like the three of you have similar ideas about how to solve this case...".*
- **Make discussions meaningful**. To do this you need to value them so your students will also value them. Assign points to your discussions based on the quality of posts, not quantity. Provide a rubric to guide the quality ([See Sample Discussion Board Rubric LDT](#))
- **Make discussions engaging.** Vary the types of discussion prompts (see ["Varying your Discussion Prompts as an Instructional Strategy"](#) for more information).
- **Discussion thread settings.** As appropriate, set your discussions to allow students to edit posts. Some discussion platforms allow a setting where students cannot read peers' posts until after they post; use this feature as appropriate.

**During your course:**

- **Refer to Students by Name.** By referring to students by name in your postings it adds to your "presence" as an instructor. (e.g. "Jose and Cate - you bring up some excellent points about this scenario".)
- **Participate actively:** Answer questions, provide feedback, and pose conflicting questions. The more instructors are involved in online discussions, the more enthusiastic and the more willing students are to participate.

- **Post with intentionality** - plan what you post. Are you looking to help learners manage procedures (logistical prompts), engage with the content or course (process prompts), focus on discipline-specific content (subject matter prompts), apply content to real-world scenarios (application prompts), or offer learners encouragement and acknowledgement (affective prompts). ([For more on these see: Posting with Intentionality](#)).
- **Keep the discussion focused:** Reframe questions if the discussion goes off topic. For example:
  *Diego and Min -Good thought to bring in this population. Such a tool could limit external distractions. Could this be more motivating than regular instruction in some way or with some usage?*
- **Ask for clarification.** For example:
  *Lisa--An excellent overview of the readings. Let me ask you to explain to everyone what you mean by active learning as a technique.*
- **Use the Socratic method of questioning as appropriate and be *careful not to halt the discussion*.** For example, say *"Have you considered this…"*.
- **Draw conclusions and provide content expertise:** Provide advanced insights and help students apply, analyze, and synthesize information.
- **Recommend resources for extension of learning:** *A recent report was put out by the US Dept of Energy looking at this very topic. Take a look at the report findings here: https://www.energy.gov/XXX*
- **Have students provide the summary and synthesis:** *What are the takeaways of this week's discussion?*
- **Balance Group Dynamics:** Ensure that no student(s) dominates the conversation, be quick to intervene in the case of hostile or offensive postings. Encourage "quiet" students to participate. Online discussions should be an equal opportunity for all students to express themselves. In an online class no one can "sit in the back of the class".

## 4. Additional Resources

- [Mastering Online Discussion Board Facilitation](#) - TeacherStream/Edutopia
- [Discussion Boards & Rubrics](#) - Center for Online Learning, Research and Service, UIS
- [Discussion Rubrics](#) - Teaching Online Pedagogical Repository, UCF

## 5. References

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