Introduction

Compared to face-to-face discussions, in asynchronous online discussions there are fewer opportunities to prompt students and responses occurs over time. However, in an online discussion, each student has an opportunity to reflect deeply on the materials, demonstrate their understanding and application of course material, and receive individual feedback from others.

Establish Objectives

Before starting to design a discussion, ask yourself what you are trying to achieve. Your goals may include:

* Fostering peer interaction and creating a sense of learning community
* Inspiring multiple perspectives
* Eliciting performance
* Providing feedback to student performance
* Brainstorming ideas for projects
* Collecting questions and/or concerns

Different objectives require different instructor preparation and participation; therefore, accurate goals provide guidance for subsequent design.

Design Question Prompts

Question prompts are used to promote student thinking, elicit responses, and foster the exchange of ideas. Discussion questions that encourage participation are:

* Strongly related to course goals, unit topics, and course requirements
* Open-ended where multiple perspectives are encouraged
* Engaging and thought-provoking

Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Learning Domains include remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Questions that focus on the final four domains more likely to generate quality discussion questions. Corresponding types of questions are explained further below.

Application Questions

Application questions are those that ask learners to apply their knowledge and understanding.They usually include problems that simulate real-life scenarios and encourage learners.

For example: *How could active learning principles be applied into a graduate math class?*

Analysis Questions

Here the learner is asked to analyze information. Such questions probe the learner’s ability to articulate relationships among concepts, ideas, and units of information.

For example: *How do you distinguish between Constructivism and Constructionism?*

Synthesis Questions

Synthesis questions may challenge a student’s ability to extrapolate key information from different learning sources and weave them into systematical, logical and meaningful whole.

For example: *Can you design a lesson plan that incorporates each of the six learning theories we discussed?*

Evaluation Questions

Here the learners evaluate certain content.

For example: *Compare both learning theories and determine which would better explain the behavior of students in the following scenario?*

Set Grading Criteria

The use of grading criteria communicate expectations and promote student participation. Online discussions are similar to short written assignments and require clear, specific criteria. Grading guidelines should include:

* Required number of posts and responses
* Deadlines for posts and responses
* Any requirements regarding content quality

Consider requiring several deadlines for one discussion; one deadline for initial posts and an additional deadline for second posts/responses. Also, consider adding additional prompts for students’ second set of posts/replies.

Explore a [variety of methods for grading online discussion participation](https://topr.online.ucf.edu/discussion-rubrics/):

Set-Up Activity

* Generally, it’s good practice to create divide students into groups for discussions. Blackboard’s Group tool includes group discussion boards.
* Choosing the option for graded discussions in Blackboard affords you the option to quickly collect all posts and responses from one student in a discussion board for quick evaluation.
* Communicate the goals for online discussions, as well as any Instructions, question prompts, grading criteria, model posts, or other helpful guidance to students.
* Instructors may identify stellar posts (and unsatisfactory posts from previous semesters) to better help students understand the instructor’s expectations and to provide guidance to struggling students.

Facilitate and Monitor the Discussion

For posts that do not meet all or certain criteria, instructors asking follow-up questions that challenge students to articulate, clarify or demonstrate with examples. Below are some exemplary follow-up questions:

* What do you mean by…?
* How does this differ from…?
* Can you provide an example of…?
* Why do you think…?

Students that participate poorly or do not participate at all should be contacted directly through email for follow-up and encouragement.

Wrap Up

At the end of an online discussion session, it is good practice to reflect on any insights and on the discussion process. Instructors can summarize what was discussed and provide feedback to the class. Instead of responding to each student after the first week of class, consider synthesizing the posts and citing several students to reinforce your comments. Student can also be given the role of a summarizer for their group.

Finally, grade discussion participation and give feedback.

Online Discussions, April 2, 2018

Faculty Academic Center of Excellence at Towson • [facet@towson.edu](mailto:facet@towson.edu) • <http://www.towson.edu/facet>

© 2018 Towson University. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-NoDerivs License.