

## Facilitating Discussion Forum Success

### **Post discussion forum etiquette and require students to read it**

Just as with e-mail, spell out how you would like students to communicate and what will not be acceptable.

### **Require that students post**

Don't make discussion forum activities optional. Human nature will keep people from participating in what might be the most important part of the class unless they are required. Once they get the hang of it, they'll be glad you made them.

### **Require that students respond to each other**

One point of a discussion forum is to get students exchanging messages with classmates, not just the instructor. This won't work unless you require them to react to each other's postings in addition to yours.

### **Build prompts that suggest pathways to constructive criticism**

Learning to give good feedback to others is an acquired skill. At first, some students will be too shy to say anything meaningful while others will tend to be tactless and cruel. Make your original prompt complex enough that it leads to a richer discussion. For starters, require that in responding to another student, a writer tells them one thing they like and one thing they would like to see improved in the posting.

### **Vary your prompts**

Although open-ended questions are the most common discussion forum prompts, there is room for creativity. For instance, post a scenario and have students respond. Have them finish a story. Post a paper or diagram with mistakes and ask them to find the mistakes. Point them to a web site, magazine article, or movie on video and ask them to post a review. Students could disclose a personal experience, create a top ten list, or devise an action plan to solve a problem.

### **Find ways to highlight the best postings**

Reward good postings with more than grades. Send a quick message to the participant. Quote the message to another student and carbon copy the original writer. Ask other students to react to an intriguing post. Copy and paste interesting material into a file that you create for each student, and reflect that content back to them occasionally.

### **Provide incentive for early postings**

If everybody posts to a discussion board on the last day of the assignment, there won't be much interaction. To avoid this, you may want to award extra credit to students who post the first day. You could also break the response period up into two parts and require posting during each period.

### **Assign discussion leaders**

As instructor, you don't have to respond to every posting or summarize every thread (in fact, you probably shouldn't). Consider appointing a student leader for each discussion

activity whose job is to clarify confusions, stir the conversation if it begins to falter, or send feedback to each of the posters. This could also be done by a team.

**Set criteria for the evaluation of responses and provide examples**

To avoid "Yes, I agree" kind of responses, provide a rubric that shows how many points different kinds of responses will earn. Give some concrete examples of both strong and weak entries.

**Choose your points of intervention carefully**

Students will not post much to a discussion board if they are in fear of being corrected, embarrassed, or summarized. Let the conversation develop before intervening. Make students work to find an answer, not just echo a premature answer from the instructor. Let them draw their own conclusions from the interaction.