How to Facilitate and Evaluate Discussion Forums

Facilitating Discussion Forums

A variety of questions and prompts will work in your online discussion forum, but no matter what the topic, clumsy moderation can close discussion down while properly greasing the wheels will keep the conversation rolling. Here are some tips from experienced online instructors:

1. **Let students dominate the conversation.**
   The purpose of the discussion forum is to let students get involved, not for you to pontificate. If you participate too much, you will scare students away. Besides, one of the side benefits of discussion forums is that they are a student-centered assignment that doesn't require much of your time. Most of the time, all the instructor should have to do is read.

2. **Rephrase the opening prompt if needed.**
   You'll know when an opening prompt isn't working if the responses are all weak or students are slow to begin the discussion. When this occurs, don't be afraid to step in and change the direction of the topic, provide more information, or rephrase the original question.

3. **Nurture a safe environment for opinions.**
   Even if you completely disagree with a student, you can praise him or her for having the bravery for taking a controversial stand before you begin to debate them. Work for an environment where no one is attacked personally and no one's opinion is completely shut down.

4. **Suggest connections between postings.**
   One way for the instructor to participate without dominating is simply to point out how the postings of different students are related or show themes. Work to help students condense a large number of opinions and responses into a few active discussion threads.

5. **Ask questions.**
   One of the best responses you can model for students is questioning. In this way, you aren't necessarily evaluating them or telling them what to write, you're just soliciting more detailed explanations. If a student posting seems to be stumping everyone, be honest about the confusion and ask them for more detail.

6. **Create a sense of community.**
   Treat your class like a group of researchers or a discussion panel working together to reach common goals. As the instructor, speak of what "we" are discussing, not what you are discussing. Praise the group's wisdom and determination.

7. **Underline or impact good points.**
   When a student makes an interesting comment, make sure it is recognized. Make it the theme of your next message, citing the student by name. Develop ideas a little further, showing what the implications of them are.

8. **Inject optimism.**
   Often, it's enough for the online instructor to simply post a message that compliments students on how well they are doing. If they are stumbling, add a few new ideas to the mix and then comment on how you are sure they will figure something out. Use some exclamation marks to add some enthusiasm and excitement!

9. **Play devil's advocate.**
   If the discussion is too one-sided, generating nothing more than a bunch of "I agree" messages, step in and play devil's advocate. Push students to at least develop the point on which they agree in greater detail.

10. **Draw out "lurkers."**
    Lurkers are discussion forum participants who only read and never post. The first way to draw them out is to require posting for grades, but if some students are still hesitant, draw them out by name in your messages. Send them email in the background inviting their participation. Find their first attempts at posting, praise them, and press them for more information.

11. **Take the focus off of a student who has become a target.**
    Sometimes because of misunderstanding, a contentious posting, or even offensive behavior, a student becomes a target for the rest of the class. Even though the flaming may be deserved, you should try to take the heat off the student. You don't want anyone to withdraw.

    You can do this by posting a message that moves the class on to a new subject, or even posting a message citing someone else, other than the offending student, who espoused related beliefs. This will give the class a new target to aim at while you work privately to resolve problematic behaviors.

12. **Recognize new or rare posters.**
    When a new or rarely heard voice enters the conversation, make sure it is recognized. This is a good way to even out participation.

13. **Respond to off-target or inappropriate postings.**
    If the conversation wanders off course, first give it a little time. It may self correct, or it may prove that students are much more interested in discussing a different topic. If it just degenerates, step in with a reminder of the original discussion topic. You can even lock the off-topic thread so students can no longer post to it.

    If the posting is instead problematic, inappropriate, or offensive, then your response is a little trickier. If no one in the class is being hurt, you might want to see if the

students resolve the problem themselves. You might want to jump in with a posting about how somebody might be offended by the last response, not directly labeling the poster, but discouraging further postings in that vein.

In a few cases, you will need to resolve the problem offline. Contact the student and have a dialog about why you can't allow the comment to stand. Remove the posting from the discussion forum. If it's in order, encourage a private apology to a student who was treated badly.

14. **Demonstrate courtesy and encouragement.**
Good manners are contagious. Model the process of praising the contributions of others, thanking them for responses, and encouraging further discussion. Some of your students will catch on, raising the tone of the whole forum.

15. **Maintain some informality.**
Discussion will die if the environment becomes too formal or stiff. If the students are too serious, throw in some humor, an interesting anecdote, or even something a little off the subject.

16. **Suggest resources for further study.**
If students show interest in a good topic, instead of jumping in with a long lecture about everything you know about the topic, provide links to resources that will provide the same information. This allows students who are interested to get more detail without slowing down the momentum of the conversation.

17. **Invite summaries instead of summarizing yourself.**
It's good to summarize the discussion when a forum has gotten overcomplicated or when it is nearing its end, but as the instructor, don't make the summary yourself. This risks a subtle shift in the discussion that invalidates some of the students or misses what the group was trying to say. Such a shift should never come from the instructor. Invite students to summarize their own progress instead.

18. **Watch out for orphans.**
Orphans are postings to which no one has responded. It is discouraging to a student when he or she posts a good message and no one ever replies. You can either respond yourself, invite a student who has posted a message with a similar theme to reply, or encourage the orphaned student to copy the original message into a related thread of discussion.

19. **Declare a "two-minute warning" and an end.**
Give a warning a day before each discussion forum is to be closed. At the end, note some highlights or give general praise. Relate the discussion to future topics that are coming in the class or other assignments. In Blackboard, you can then archive the forum or use the sequencing tools to drop the forum to the bottom of the list of forums for the class.

Evaluating Discussion Forums

You have many options when you evaluate the results of a discussion forum. Select one or several of the following options. Communicate the method of evaluation to the class as the forum begins.

- Pass-fail evaluation based on meeting minimal requirements.

- Counting the number of acceptable posts and grading by quantity only.

- Assigning points to each post based on quality, up to a certain possible score for each forum.

- Instructor- or student-chosen best postings or best responses on each topic get bonus points.

- Students reflect on their own participation at the end of the forum and decide all or part of their own scores.

- Students take turns moderating the forums and receive extra points for this leadership.

- Posting to the discussion forum is factored into the participation grade.

- Extra points are given for participation in help forums or leadership in forum assignments.

- The first posting on a new topic is rewarded with a few bonus points.

Forums can be used for purposes other than assigned discussions. Try some of these ideas as well:

- Hold a forum as a precursor to discussion assignments to discuss methods and standards for participation.

- Create a student coffeehouse for discussion of the class in general or even non-academic subjects.

- Build a technical support site. Answer questions there yourself, ask a technician on staff to assist, or even give extra points to students who you know are technically gifted.

- Use discussion forums as study groups for upcoming tests or major assignments.

- Evaluate the course or part of the course in the discussion forum. Ask questions about student feedback, or ask them to submit their favorite assignments, their disappointments, or topics about which they still have questions.