



Facilitating Interactive Discussion Forums

Why are online discussions vital to student learning? Research indicates that student interactions and collaboration in online discussions can lead to increased student motivation, community building, improved critical thinking, and co-creation of knowledge, which in turn impact student learning outcomes. So, how can you go about facilitating interactive discussions to improve student learning and satisfaction? One major consideration is designing and planning your discussions ahead of time. Here are some quick tips for consideration:

Clarify your Role as the Facilitator

- Let students know ahead of time how you will facilitate the discussion. Ideally, the focus should be on the students' exchange of ideas, not the instructors.
- Encourage student ownership of the discussion by allowing them to talk to each other, not through you.

Model Discussion Behavior

- Model the discussion behavior you expect from the students by reading their posts, responding to questions, and clarifying points as needed.

Set Expectations

- Lay out a structure for the discussion by providing guidelines such as a timeframe, number of postings required, number of responses students should post to other students' posts, etc.
- Remind students to use proper etiquette and be respectful while defending their positions or challenging their classmates' posts.

Maintain your Presence

- Be an active online participant. Students are more inclined to engage in the discussion if they see the instructor participating. Research shows that teaching presence is a great motivator for students to engage and keep them focused on the discussion.
- Monitor the discussion and guide it back on track if you see it is going off topic.
- Summarize key points discussed.

Develop Challenging Discussion Prompts

- Discussion prompts should be thought-provoking and open-ended—and can be controversial. You might try structuring a discussion as a debate or as a role-play activity.
- Structure discussions to help students develop critical thinking skills. Allow for multiple student perspectives to reflect in the discussions.



Ask Probing Questions

- Stimulate the discussion to take it deeper and move it forward.
- Pose probing or trigger questions to help students to make connections between ideas, construct knowledge, and apply existing knowledge.

Provide Constructive and Actionable Feedback

- Provide actionable feedback to assist students self-assess and improve performance going forward. If students are performing at the level you expect, constructive feedback will keep them motivated to elevate their levels of performance in the future.

Let Students Moderate Discussions

- Change it up! Let students moderate the discussion forum or have student groups moderate and summarize key points at the end.
- Let students vote on student-generated topics. This will help to get student buy-in and enhance their motivation to engage in discussions.

Assign a Grade

- Provide an incentive for students to interact and engage in the discussion forum by assigning a grade for the discussion activities. Research indicates that when the discussions accounted for 10–20% of the course grade, students were motivated to contribute and participate in the discussions.
- Develop a rubric to assess the discussion forum activities and let students view it ahead of the activities to see how they will be graded.

References

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