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Teaching Online

A Practical Guide

THIRD EDITION

it difficult and exhausting to facilitate synchronous sessions with a large group. Both asynchronous and synchronous communication have their advantages as well as disadvantages. Asynchronous discussion allows time for reflection and encourages more careful consideration but often lacks spontaneity and it may take longer to arrive at a conclusion or for a group to reach a decision. Synchronous communication provides a sense of immediacy and cultivates a feeling of responsiveness among participants while allowing for quicker problem solving, but at the same time the greater speed and short-hand expression can lead to misunderstandings, superficial interaction, and poorly considered decisions. Many of the shortcomings of synchronous discussion can be alleviated by software that provides a means for archiving or replaying as well as by careful preparation leading up to a synchronous session. The disadvantages of asynchronous discussion are downplayed when the discussion prompts and questions are well-constructed and stimulating, the facilitating instructor has some skill in tending discussion, and there is a clear beginning and ending schedule for the asynchronous discussion, with students willing to post throughout the week rather than all jumping in during the last two days of a week.

Tips for Fostering Asynchronous Discussion

In Chapter 6, we discussed the impact that a particular discussion software structure may have on the way you organize your discussions. However, no matter how your software may be organized, there are techniques you can use to foster greater participation and clarity among your students.

1. *Start the major topic threads yourself.* It's a good idea for the instructor to start all major topic threads unless you have designated a forum for student presentation or have designated students to act as the moderator. If you wish to (and your software permits), you can allow students to contribute additional threads as they feel the need. This arrangement should be considered with great care, however, because students often tend to create new topics without real necessity, and your discussion area may soon be overwhelmed with too many threads on duplicate topics.

Asynchronous or Synchronous Discussion?

Some instructors are firm believers in synchronous communication for fostering a sense of online community while others find

2. *Narrow down topics.* A good discussion needs pruning and shaping. An overly broad topic thread—say, "The French Revolution: What Do You Think of It?"—will often result in very fragmented discussion. This is especially true in an introductory class, in which most students know little about the subject. If you divide up broad topics into logical subtopics—say, "Economic Conditions on the Eve of the Revolution" or "The Execution of the Royal Family"—you can prevent the discussion from going off in too many directions. In an introductory class, you may want to provide even more guidance. For example, a discussion based on specific readings in the textbook, on a focused web site visit, or on assigned exercises, coupled with your guideline questions, will likely be more productive than simply pointing students to the forum and expecting them to find their own direction.

A short series of closely related questions can allow students to jump in on any one of the points and still find themselves "on topic." In our example of the French Revolution, a topic thread might contain several questions about the economic conditions and invite students to choose one to which to respond:

> *Please address one of the following, "What were the land-holding patterns? How important was foreign trade? Had the average well-being of the citizens improved or worsened in the years leading up to the Revolution? Give a rationale and provide support for your response."*

The shaping of discussions takes some genuine forethought. You might think of this task as similar to creating chapters in a book or long article you are writing. Threads will stay of manageable length if you keep topics specific and allow a place such as a lounge or question-and-answer forum for off-topic conversations.

Sometimes, of course, a thread goes off on a digression that is so valuable and interesting in itself that you don't want to curb it. The pruning and organization of threads is for the purpose of sustaining discussion, not stifling it. Allow students to digress, but if you think that the new direction in the conversation calls for an entirely new thread, you might

create one or suggest that a student begin a new topic message to explore the subject further.

3. *Organize forums and threads to reflect the class chronology or topical sequence and suggest a pattern for posting.* The organization of discussion forums should complement the class structure but also provide some reminders of the course chronology and sequence. For example, creating one forum for each week or unit of the course helps students know at a glance where they should be looking for that week's activity. Even if you don't have a forum structure, you can designate all the threads for a particular week under the rubric "Week 1" or "Unit 1."

Suggest a schedule for posting that is appropriate to the topic, assignment, and your student audience—for example, if you want students to comment on other students' postings, you might suggest that everyone post their first responses to your question by midweek and to classmates during the remainder of the week. You may even set up your system of credit for the discussion participation rubric to reflect that. (If you have many working students who must do the greater portion of their schoolwork on the weekends, and you are able to do so, you may want the class week to run from Tuesday through Monday rather than Monday through Sunday.)

If you have a general forum area for ongoing questions about the course, you might want to divide this up by week so that students can more easily find questions that pertain to a particular week's activities.

4. *Address students by name and encourage students to signal topics and clarify responses.* Mention the student's name in responding to their message: "Joan, your point certainly reflects on the issue of the previous chapter." Change the subject line to reflect the topic of your response ("Response to Joan," or "Joan and the previous chapter's issue," etc.) and encourage students to do the same. Clarify the portion of the message to which you are responding through copying of the statement before your own reply, quotation marks or whatever means your discussion software features most readily allow and remind your students to do the same. (While some

discussion software automatically repeats the entire message to which one replies, you may need to pinpoint the relevant portion.)

5. *Key the thread topics to appropriate and relevant activities.* Keying thread topics to the assignments, readings, projects, and exercises for a particular week will help keep students on topic in their discussions and also provide an obvious place to discuss anything that occurs in the course during that week. While you may have some key topics in mind, do allow students to ask related questions that you may not have anticipated. Adding a prompt at the end of the discussion question such as "If you have another question based on this week's reading, feel free to post it in reply/post it in a new thread." Or you may create a thread each week that is a placeholder for "other questions about this week's readings and activities."

6. *Establish a pattern of frequent response.* Students tend to follow instructor expectations for online participation, and these expectations are communicated not only by the declarations of the syllabus but also by the instructor's behavior. During the first week or so, if your class size allows (this would be in a class of no more than thirty students), greet all students individually in the classroom as they arrive and engage as many as possible in discussion. Thereafter make an effort to respond to a diverse group of students each week—not just to the same one or two individuals. If you have a large class, you will find yourself rotating your time among all the small groups, as well as tending to any all-class forums. For a class of fifty, Christine Appel notes that instructors in the Open University of Catalonia's (UOC) Modern English 1 are expected to monitor the group discussion areas, and are expected to post in either the announcement area or the group discussion areas at least once every forty-eight hours. A rhythm is established so that students visit the common forum at the beginning of each major project, and return again at the end of each project to the common forum to share what their groups have accomplished.

In such large classes, rather than engaging in long, concentrated visits to your classroom, it is best to establish a pattern of short but frequent activity. When students see you "poke your head into" the classroom (that is, see your postings), it makes them feel that you are truly present and actively responding to the class. In contrast, when students see that an instructor rarely engages with them, they are discouraged from posing questions and comments aimed even indirectly at the instructor, and they may also conclude that the instructor will be unaware of what is going on in the classroom.

Think in terms of three to five short periods of logging on each week, rather than the one or two sessions you may be used to in your on-campus courses. If you have only four hours to devote to the classroom in one week, spend an hour for each of four days in the classroom, rather than two hours twice a week. This will allow you to keep up with the flow of student discussions and will also reinforce the impression that you are responsive and on the scene.

If you are teaching a primarily on-campus course that meets once a week and also has an online component, you will have to decide how important student discussion online will be in your class. If you really want students to make use of this venue, then you too must actively attend to it. The discussion forum is a great place for you to continue conversations you started in class or for the TA to extend the weekly discussion section. Initiate topics on a weekly basis and require some weekly participation from students in the online forum. This is also the best place to update the class on changes and errors, to pose and answer questions, and to help students review material. Again, unless you are actively "showing the flag" in this area, students will quickly learn that they can ignore it with impunity.

7. *Facilitate and build on participation.* While the instructor needs to be seen as engaged, don't try to respond to every posting in the classroom. Even in a class of twenty, this will quickly overwhelm you and can actually put a damper on student discussion. The quality of your postings is as important as frequency. And you want to encourage students to interact with each other, not only with you. So make comments that address a whole train of thought—responding, for

example, to five or six related messages in the thread rather than to each of the five individually. In this way you will do your part to encourage participation as well as interaction among students. Think about jumping in or tending to the conversational fires at critical junctures, working as a facilitator to help move the discussion forward and keep the fire going.

Don't merely post friendly expressions of affirmation. You should also contribute comments that summarize what students have posted, as well as follow-up questions that stimulate further discussion. In some cases, it might be appropriate to invite students' responses to their classmates' ideas: "Anyone else want to comment on Tom's observation?" "Did anyone reach a different conclusion about this issue?"

If a class is fairly quiet, it may seem that it's a good idea to jump in and reply as soon as someone finally posts something. The truth is, instructors feel uncomfortable when nobody's talking. Resist the temptation to jump in too quickly and risk squelching student voices with an excess of chatter or by answering the question you have posed to them. There are also times when there will be a lull in conversations because students are working on a major assignment. Some instructors may even schedule a "quiet time," such as a few days during which students are encouraged to devote most of their time to a project.

8. *Provide feedback that stimulates higher-level thinking.* Look for student postings that imply unspoken assumptions or suggest a line of other questioning. Provide follow-up responses that ask for more information or deeper consideration, from the student posting and/or the other students in the class. For example, ask students questions like, "What are the implications of your statement?" "What evidence is there to support your point of view?" "Does anyone want to add to/dispute/verify that?"

Equally important is to confirm when students are on the right path but then help guide them to the next step: "What Joe has said about X theory is sound, but when we look at it operating in the area of Y rules, how would we go about testing that theory? Anyone want to tackle this?" It may also be appropriate to ask students to apply issues to real-world

situations—"Several of you have posted comments on the economic price of environmental protection. Can anyone think of a current example in which economic development has been negatively impacted by environmental degradation and explain how?"

9. *Be aware of cultural patterns as well as differences in personal styles in discussion.* If you have a classroom that includes students from another country, be alert and request information from informants (rather than making assumptions) about the best way to ask questions. For example, a group of students from a particular culture may not respond very well to questions and topics that call for volunteered responses. In this case, a question like "Anyone want to comment on this?" is better altered to "I would like to hear what you think about this. Please post your response to this question by Wednesday afternoon."

Be aware, too, that not all students respond well to the same approaches to discussion. For example, some students respond poorly to a question that asks them to share personal experiences, while others are not at all shy about divulging information about their background and preferences. We think it's important to respect these differences and not make students feel boxed in by the way you frame a question. A way around this problem can be to split the question in such a way as to offer an alternative: "Can you relate this to your own experience or one you have heard or read about?"

10. *Prepare a strategy for potentially controversial discussions.* It is even more important to have a strategy for approaching potentially controversial subjects online than in a face-to-face class since it is more likely you will see a wider range of students posting online than might have been willing to venture an opinion on-campus. If you have a code of conduct or netiquette stated up front, that will help matters as you gently remind the class as a whole when people tend to stray from the rules. When strong opinions are expressed that seem irrelevant to the subject matter, you may redirect as needed. When relevant but unsupported opinions arise, don't hesitate to ask for facts to back up assertions or to ask for clarification. Avoid irony or heavy-handed phrasing—remember that as

the instructor, what you say automatically carries a lot of weight and without vocal cues, students may easily misinterpret irony. If you know that the subject matter is inherently controversial, you may want to ask students to debate an issue and either assign them randomly to a particular viewpoint or ask them to take the side most opposed to their own personal view. Having to research and defend a position with logic often helps students discuss highly charged subjects.

A Study in Workload Management

A community college instructor, Fred is assigned to teach an online course in American history. He finds that he has been asked to teach a class of fifty students, the same number as in his on-campus course. He has always prided himself on promoting active discussion in his courses and wants to continue to do so in his online course, so he requires that all students contribute to the discussion on a weekly basis in order to receive participation credit.

Two weeks into the course, Fred is overwhelmed by the time it takes him to read through and respond to the student discussion postings. Instead of the dozen students who usually dominate the class discussion, a much larger percentage of his class freely express themselves on the discussion board, to his surprise and delight. However, most students seem to respond directly to his postings and seldom to other students. This means a substantial amount of his time is needed to read and respond to students.

Also, the sheer number of postings on the discussion board each week makes it hard for him to follow the conversations. Students often arbitrarily start new threads instead of replying to a thread, making it hard to follow the continuity of a discussion.

Following the advice of a colleague, an experienced online instructor, Fred divides the class into five smaller groups of ten students each for the purposes of discussion. He refines his participation credit so that students must respond to at least one other classmate each week rather than only to the instructor's initial discussion threads. He asks students to remember to reply to a message rather than start new threads for a response and to save new threads for new topics or clearly divergent subtopics.

Fred finds that he is able to circulate among the five discussion groups, addressing his remarks to each group as a whole as much as to individuals. Discussions are easier to follow, and as an added benefit, students begin to provide more follow-up questions and comments to their classmates, raising the overall quality of the discussion.