

Discussions

As discussion activities help students process and digest information rather than simply receive it, they have a significant contribution to learning in all disciplines. The goal of a discussion is to get students to practice thinking about the course material. Therefore, leading a discussion differs from lecturing and the instructor's role shifts to that of facilitator. The instructor designs and facilitates the discussion rather than conveying information.



Discussion activities, whether **online** or **face-to-face**, can serve a variety of purposes and can be used to meet a wide range of instructional objectives. Instructional discussions should be used to meet specific course objectives and should be aligned with course content. Well-designed discussion activities can be used to encourage the following:

- **Demonstration of knowledge of key concepts** - Using the discussion to discuss key concepts allows students to learn from one another and share ideas. When students submit an assignment directly to an instructor, this sharing of ideas is lost.
- **Community Building** - One of the primary reasons for using discussions is to build a community of learners. This tool allows students to become part of a vibrant learning community, rather than just an independent learner completing and submitting assignments with no real peer interaction.
- **Reflection** - Reflective activities require students to share a synthesis of the learning experience, or to describe how a situation or experience has personal value to them. These kinds of activities should allow for honest and open responses.
- **Consensus Building** - Consensus building activities require students to work together to create a product or to come to an agreement on some topic.
- **Critical Thinking** - Through the use of higher order questioning techniques and activities discussions can be used to encourage critical thinking skills.
- **Student Leadership**: The effective use of discussion tasks can encourage student leadership by giving them a voice in the classroom.

Planning

First, decide what you want your students to get out of the discussion. For instance, do you want them to share responses, make new connections, and articulate the implications of a text? Identifying the objective for the discussion will help you decide what kind of discussion activities will best help your students reach that objective.

Discussion Topic

If the instructor starts discussion merely by saying "Discuss prejudice", no one may express their opinions as the instruction is too open-ended. On the other hand, merely asking for the basic facts will not work either. Asking a list of questions that require only brief factual replies and little student involvement (e.g. When did the Battle of XYZ occur?) will not be useful either. Usually, here is only a factual answer and the result cannot be called a discussion. So, the students should be given an open-ended problem to solve, a task to complete, a judgment to reach, a decision to make, or a list to create—something that requires closure. Consider using some of these to generate discussion in your classes:

- Exploratory: probe facts and basic knowledge
- Challenge: interrogate assumptions, conclusions, or interpretations
- Relational: ask for comparisons of themes, ideas, or issues
- Diagnostic: probe motives or causes
- Cause & Effect: ask for causal relationships between ideas, actions, or events
- Hypothetical: pose a change in the facts or issues
- Priority: seek to identify the most important issues
- Summary: elicit synthesis

Student Groups

The following should be considered when assigning students to groups:

- **How big should the groups be?** 2 to 6 is ideal. Smaller groups (2-3) are better for simple tasks and reaching consensus. Also, students are more likely to speak in smaller groups. Larger groups of 4-5 are better for more complex tasks and generating lots of ideas.
- **How should students be assigned to groups?** Randomly assigning students to groups eliminates the problem of students' wanting to be in the same groups as their friends. For long-term groups, you may want to select for certain attributes or skills or by interest in the topic, if different groups have different tasks.

Guidelines and Instructions

Knowing the content to be covered is not enough. The instructor should clearly express what the students will be able to do with the information or ideas. For example, in a philosophy class for which students have read a chapter on theories of knowledge, the instructor might ask students to construct legitimate arguments for and against any theory about which they have read.

Debriefing Method

Many techniques can get students to share what their smaller groups have done with the entire class: verbally, on flipchart, written report etc. And you don't have to hear from everyone; calling on a few groups at random to report works quite well. To encourage student cross-team competition, reporting out from groups is simultaneous. Answers can be posted to a Powerpoint slide, Padlet, or pieces of paper hung on noticeboards in the classroom.



Strategies for Discussions

- **Delay the problem-solving part** until the rest of the discussion has had time to develop. Start with expository questions to clarify the facts, then move to analysis, and finally to evaluation, judgment, and recommendations.
- **Shift points of view:** "Now that we've seen it from [X's] standpoint, what's happening here from [Y's] standpoint?" "What evidence would support Y's position?" "What are the dynamics between the two positions?"
- **Ask for benefits/disadvantages of a position** for all sides.
- **Shift to another context:** "We see how a person who thinks X would see the situation. How would a person who thinks Y see it?" "We see what happened in the news, how could this be handled in [your town]?" "How might [insert person, organization] address this problem?"
- **Follow-up questions:** "What do you mean by ___?" Or, "Could you clarify what you said about ___?" (even if it was a pretty clear statement—this gives students time for thinking, developing different views, and exploration in more depth). Or "How would you square that observation with what [name of person] pointed out?"
- **Point out and acknowledge differences in discussion**— "that's an interesting difference from what Ceyhan just said, Nurcan. Let's look at where the differences lie." (Let sides clarify their points before moving on).
- **Compare topics from a previous week** — "Use the four theories we have covered to create a slide that answers the following questions..."

Online Discussion Boards



- Builds class community by promoting discussion on course topics
- Allows time for in-depth reflection- students have more time to reflect, research and compose their thoughts before participating in the discussion.
- Facilitates learning by allowing students to view and to respond to the work of others.
- Develops thinking and writing skills.

Icebreakers/Introductory Activities

Icebreakers are a good example of social discussion forums. They provide students with an opportunity to get to know one another and to interact in an Informal way. They should be fun and non-threatening and require participants to find something in common with others in the group.



- **Personal Introductions** - ask each student to introduce themselves on the discussion board at the beginning of the term. Respond to each student & encourage the class to respond to one another's introductions.
- **Portrait** - students create a portrait of themselves in any medium, digitize the portrait and share it on the discussion board.
- **Interviews** - have pairs of students interview each other on a given topic and post the interview results in the discussion board.

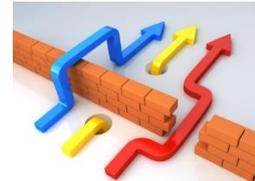
Tips for Encouraging Participation in Online Discussions

1. Ask open-ended questions that don't just have a yes or no answer.
2. If you do ask a question with a yes-or-no answer, require half of the students to support one side of the argument, and the other half to support the other side.
3. Include multimedia (images, videos, or infographics, etc.) into the starter question to generate more interest in the topic.
4. Participate in the discussion yourself, by questioning and commenting on students' posts. Make yourself visible in the discussion. Students will be more likely to engage in the discussion if they see you as being a part of it.
5. Model and demonstrate by example the type of writing/communication that you would like the students to use. Provide structure for students to post to threads as it lessens the frustration of what to write.
6. Allow students to create their own discussion threads.
7. Do not allow domination of the discussion. If students are dominating the discussion, privately ask them to slow down a little.
8. Provide grades for the frequency and quality of each student's participation in the discussion. Consider offering extra participation points for students who continue the discussions even after the end date.
9. If you use the discussion forums for assessment, assess the quality as well as the quantity of the students' online posts. Using rubrics will allow students to have a clear guideline of your expectations for quality of their posts.
10. When you create exams, include questions related to the discussions.
11. Most importantly, make sure to provide clear guidelines for students as to what you expect them to do on the discussion boards:
 - How often do you expect each student to post? Once a week? Twice a week?
 - Can students simply agree with what have already been said, or do you expect them to generate new ideas with each post?
 - Are students required to back up their thoughts and opinions with sources?
 - How long should each post be? Is one line enough, or must they post a developed piece of several paragraphs?
 - Should the language and writing be formal or informal?
 - Is there a specified end date for the discussion, or do you expect the discussion to continue indefinitely?

Discussion Board Pitfalls

While Discussion Boards are a great tool for building community and providing a means for students to share their ideas with the group, there are some common problems and pitfalls:

- Students may misunderstand directions or may be unsure of what is expected of them.
- Student comments can become off track or go in a direction that is not supported in the lesson.
- Students may stall or put off participating in the discussion board until the last minute.
- Students may not feel a sense of connection with their classmates.
- Students may react in an inappropriate way by flaming other students or making disinterested or disrespectful comments to their peers or in response to assignments.



Tips for Avoiding Common Discussion Board Pitfalls

- Structure online discussion board activities carefully - provide clear guidelines for posting material, how often to comment, length of comment, and what information to include in the comments. Ask students to respond using specifics from their textbook readings or other sources.
- Encourage students to contact you if they don't understand the assignment or are having technical difficulties.
- Demonstrate ways to support arguments, cite textbook references/online resources to support a point of view in your own postings.
- Establish guidelines for giving students credit for discussion board participation - give points for posting regularly, responding to classmates' posts, staying on topic, and responding in a thoughtful manner.
- Use small group activities to help build community and establish peer communication and connection.
- Encourage students to interact informally. Create discussion threads or areas for personal introductions and social interaction.
- Establish clear Netiquette guidelines and acceptable behaviour policies at the very beginning. Monitor discussion boards regularly to ensure no inappropriate behaviour is occurring. Contact students privately regarding inappropriate behaviour.



For a tutorial about how to create and manage discussion forums on Blackboard, [click here](#).

References

Cashin, W. E. (2011). Effective classroom discussions. IDEA Paper number 49.

The Tools for Successful Online Teaching, Lisa Dawley, 2007

<https://blogs.onlineeducation.touro.edu/10-tips-for-boosting-participation-in-online-discussion-boards/>