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## TEACHING & LEARNING: GUIDE TO ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARDS

# Facilitation

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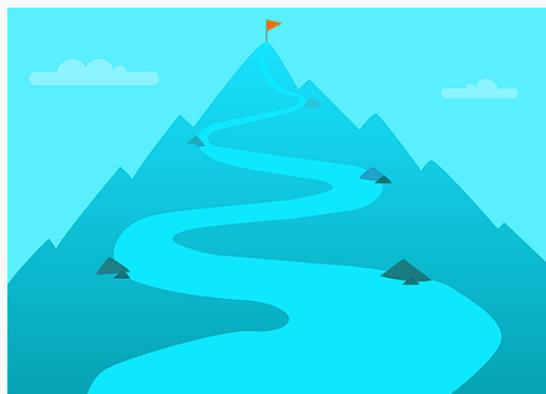
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## Facilitating a robust online discussion



Facilitating online discussion boards can be challenging. A [facilitator](#) needs to encourage active engagement of students in the online discussions and enrich the learning experiences in the forum.

As an online [facilitator](#), your role is to promote thinking, challenge learners to think, consider a problem or situation from alternative viewpoints and to develop new knowledge through thinking and constructing. Your role is analogous to a 'coach'.

As a [facilitator](#), you should keep the discussion on track and help those that tend to stray, focus on the material being discussed. You should help to advance the discussion if it happens to become "stuck"

or stilted. However, as a [facilitator](#), you should not be so heavily involved that you impede the process or the flow of discussion. The literature suggests that if your intervention is minimal, students tend to more freely express their thoughts and opinions.

## Before discussion

Post the rules of [netiquette](#) and behaviour expectations at the start of class. Make your expectations clear. Be sure that your students know what you expect of them within the discussion board. Do you want more formal responses that are referenced or should the tone be casual? To what extent do you want students to respond to their peers? Consider responding to the prompt yourself (and/or replying to student responses) to model the type of behaviour you want to see from your students.

You may want to explicitly require that students respond to a certain number of their peers' postings. In this case, be sure to also designate clear deadlines for the timing of the first post and the responses to avoid having all of the

discussions crammed into a short period near the due date. This will also enrich the quality of the discussions as students and [facilitators](#) will have more time to reflect on postings.

Include some guidelines for effective posting, and model them in your own posts. Some useful tips:

- › Do your research before posting. Make sure that you have a reasonable understanding of the topics to be discussed. Take notes as you research. Write down useful website locations for future use.
- › Present a strong argument or perspective that is, where possible, backed up by research.
- › Try to keep responses relevant to the current thread or topic.
- › Bring a unique perspective to the post that may open up other avenues of discussion and enrich learning.
- › Pre-prepare your post in a text editor. This will allow both good grammar and style and also allow you to engage more with your topic.
- › Stimulate interest in your post by incorporating links or other resources for further information.

## During discussion

Encourage students to introduce themselves and meet one another to form a learning community where they will feel safe to share and discuss. Encourage students to participate early and often. Below are some ideas for fostering and maintaining a learning community:

- › **Be present!** While you should be posting to the discussion less often as the term progresses, continue to read students' comments and look for emerging patterns and problems, both with the content being discussed and the groups' processes/dynamics. You can then post your observations on these issues or bring them into your classroom. Also feel free to stimulate debate, offer ideas, and offer resources (versus answers).
- › **Consider the use of video in postings.** Many students are visual learners and so the use of videos can enhance the learning experience. Videos can be posted by students and/or [facilitators](#) to enrich the discussion.
- › **Assign roles.** Consider assigning roles within a discussion so that [students](#) have to act as a [facilitators](#), researcher, summarizer, questioner, etc. Students will have clear expectations for fulfilling their role and may engage in higher-order thinking skills while engaging with the question from a new perspective. You can switch up the roles on a regular basis so that students have the opportunity to cycle through each of the responsibilities.
- › **Encourage students to respond to each other.** Just as in a traditional classroom discussion, students need to be reminded to talk to each other directly, not through you as the instructor. Your decreased presence online should help to encourage this. You can also redirect questions and comments from one student to another to encourage interactive conversations and clarify the context of a student response. Always wait to see if another

student will respond first, before responding to a student's post. Respond with questions, rather than authoritative statements. This enables students to be reflective and clearly state their intentions and objectives, while highlighting that interpretation of a question/post can change according to different perspectives. Make connections within the curriculum; where possible connect a response to a previous post from another student.

- › **Don't overuse the discussion boards.** Rather than requiring students to answer generic weekly questions in the same format, continue only using the discussion board for the most important, difficult, or controversial topics. These discussions should be meaningful learning experiences, not just a box to check off each week.
- › **Promote controversial discussion.** This is another tactic that can be effective in supporting development of critical thinking skills. More instruction and facilitation is needed with this method, though most online facilitators find the ensuing results well worth any additional effort.
- › **Mix it up — ask a variety of types of questions.** Develop discussion questions that allow the student to critically reflect on the material and synthesize it with their own experiences. Ask a range of question types throughout the course, perhaps increasing in complexity. Consider the objectives of each discussion and the quality of thinking you are expecting from your students.
- › **Creating good and right discussion questions.** Good questions are just as important as the right questions. Questions must meet two criteria, be open-ended [good] and prompt students to reflect and analyse, and be 'right' in that they support and lead students to construct and develop knowledge in support of intended learning outcomes.
- › **Provide flexibility to the student by offering multiple prompts.** Consider providing students with more than one prompt to choose from so that they can speak to the topic that resonates most with them. This can be useful in larger classes, as it may promote more intimate conversations between smaller groups and can limit the repetition that sometimes occurs with many students responding to the same question.
- › **Encourage different types of responses.** Encourage students to respond to prompts in different ways. Perhaps give them the option to respond to a single topic with: a comparison of multiple perspectives; a relevant personal experience; follow-up questions of their own resources related to the topic that might be interesting to their peers; a rebuttal to someone else's response; different types of conversations around a single topic may lead to more stimulating and well-rounded discussion and alleviate the issue of repetitive responses.
- › **Ask probing questions to stimulate continued dialogue.** Insert yourself into the discussion to push the conversation higher. Ask follow-up questions that require students to explain their reasoning or provide evidence for their initial response. Make connections between students that may have made similar (or conflicting) arguments. You can even consider playing "Devil's Advocate" to encourage students to think about an issue from different perspectives.
- › **Use questions to promote deep learning.** Some examples include;
  - › That is an interesting point; What might someone who disagrees with you say to challenge your opinion?

- › Can you compare your response to xxx (other student post)?
- › Are you both saying the same thing or not? Why or why not?
- › You make a good observation, can you give us some examples to support your view?
- › What are alternatives to the one you suggested? Are there other solutions? What is your reasoning for this?
- › Can you compare this with the xxxx post? What is different and what is similar?
- › What might happen to xxxxx if your idea was implemented as you described?
- › **Encourage reluctant participants.** You can begin this by commenting on participant silence in the general discussion. If this does not increase participation, you may want to communicate one-on-one with the student(s) in question. Try to find out what has been causing their limited participation: is it a technical problem or do they lack confidence in their discussion skills? At minimum, praise their efforts and let them know they are not anonymous in your class. Exchange a few emails until they make a comment that you can suggest they forward to the discussion. While this takes a little more of your time, the students will greatly benefit from the attention.
- › **Encouraging engaging discussions** Facilitators can encourage students to actively discuss by:
  - › Asking follow-up questions, and paraphrasing the comments for everyone to ponder; a combination of initiating and probing questions can be an effective approach to bring out participants' ideas further.
  - › Asking the contributor for further clarification and/or elaboration.
  - › Re-visiting past contributions and incorporating them into subsequent discussions.
  - › Encouraging others to add their reactions or ideas to build on someone's comment.
  - › Not being afraid to admit your own ignorance or confusion if you don't know something – invite others to provide resources, and use the opportunity to discuss with the group how one might go about researching the issue.
  - › Realising that discomfort and silence are ok, but balance this with posts that have a clearly stated context and purpose and re-engage students.
  - › Intervening when the discussion is veering off in the wrong direction and consequently encouraging student to move the discussion back on track.
- › **Rein in dominant participants.** Again, as with quiet students, consider contacting students who dominate individually to make them aware of the situation and ask them to reflect longer before responding. You could also assign them to be mentors for less vocal students.
- › **Create an inclusive environment.** What do the participants bring to the group? What characteristics may give participants a unique perspective? Enhance self-awareness and awareness of others within the cohort. An early discussion may include students reflecting on the following:
  - › What do I bring to the group?
  - › What surprises or challenges me?

- › What behaviours am I most familiar or comfortable with?
- › What behaviours challenge me?

## Dos and don'ts during discussion

Do:

- › Allow participants to introduce themselves in the Discussion Board forum. This should be somewhat directed by asking students to include specific details such as where they live and what course they are studying, and a "fun" question such as "what is your favourite holiday destination?" or "what is your earliest childhood memory?".
- › Be clear up front about expectations and intentions amongst participants and the facilitator; clarify the goals of each session to the group.
- › Keep discussions constructive and positive.
- › Use inclusive language.
- › Be honest when providing constructive criticisms of posts.
- › Ask for clarification if unclear about a participant's intent or question.
- › Treat participants with respect and consideration.
- › Develop an awareness for barriers for learning (cultural; social; experiential).
- › Provide sufficient time and space for participants to gather their thoughts and contribute to discussions.
- › Provide opportunities for participants to pair-share.
- › Establish ground rules:
  - › Share personal experiences rather than make general statements about groups of people (stereotyping).
  - › Ask dominant participants to allow others to speak.
  - › Give all participants a voice- at the start highlight the value of a diversity of perspectives as an essential part of the process.
  - › Go over constructive and destructive group behaviours at the start of the course / workshop.
  - › Request that if participants challenge others' ideas, they back it up with evidence, appropriate experiences, and/or appropriate logic.
- › Try to keep the group on task with respect to the objectives of the discussion without rushing them
- › If the group starts to veer in the direction of negativity and/or pointless venting, ask them how they would like to address this.
- › Step back when a group is functional/functioning – help participants become independent learners; take control of their learning.

Don't:

- › Use certain conventions or language that will exclude certain groups from understanding the context of the discussion, or make them feel uncomfortable.
- › Assume participants all have the same expectations when the group first convenes.
- › Over-generalize behaviour or have stereotypical expectations of participants (tokenism).
- › Use (or allow others to use) disrespectful language or tone, or disrespectful non-verbal communication.
- › Convey a sense of self-importance or superiority.
- › Allow only the dominant or more verbal participants to take over the conversation.
- › Discourage alternate views or counter-arguments.
- › Try to be someone else - always be yourself.

## After discussion

**Summarise discussions.** Either you or your students need to weave comments together regularly to synthesize the discussion and move it forward. In these comments, you should refer to specific comments made, identify the various points of view, and interpret the main contribution of the discussion. A summary is also an effective way to end a discussion. Remember that several small discussions are more effective than one discussion taken too far.

**Ensure clear organization of messages.** You may need to move a comment from one discussion conference to another if you have multiple discussions or multiple threads running at once. One way to do this is to copy the message and mail it to its author with an explanation of why you are suggesting a move, then delete it from the discussion forum. This enables the student to easily send the copy to the right discussion forum.



## Resources

- › The Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education: [http://fold.org.au/guide\\_intro.html](http://fold.org.au/guide_intro.html)
- › Effective online classroom practices: <https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/teaching-learning/effective-classroom-practices/discussions-seminars/facilitating>
- › Tips for Instructors in online discussion: <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/blended-learning/online-discussions-tips-instructors>

- › Mastering online discussion boards: <https://www.edutopia.org/pdfs/stw/edutopia-onlinelearning-mastering-online-discussion-board-facilitation.pdf>
- › Insights into online discussion board learning: <http://tep.uoregon.edu/technology/blackboard/docs/discussionboard.pdf>
- › Facilitating effective online discussion: <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/eight-tips-for-facilitating-effective-online-discussion-forums/>
- › Facilitating online discussions: <http://edtech.sesp.northwestern.edu/2016/02/12/strategies-for-facilitating-better-online-discussions/>
- › Creating robust online discussion: <https://onlinelearninginsights.wordpress.com/2012/06/25/how-to-create-robust-discussions-online/>
- › Questioning as facilitating strategies in online discussion: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.2190/ET.42.4.f?journalCode=etsa>

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