

Teaching and Learning Tips for Developing or Improving Online Discussions

Whether you are teaching an online or blended course, or supplementing one of your on campus courses using Blackboard, the Discussion board can be a vital area where student learning takes place.

Challenges when using the discussion board are manifold. Questions that instructors often ask instructional designers include, “how to”:

- Respond appropriately to students without feeling overwhelmed (manage workload)
- Keep discussion activities interesting and engaging for students
- Assist students in holding a productive discussion
- Manage student behavior on the discussion board
- Write “good” discussion prompts
- Use Socratic inquiry and discussion moderation techniques to develop prompts, and facilitate discussions.

These questions will be addressed during the remainder of this resource.

Responding appropriately to students

When working with online discussions, the focus shifts from a traditional classroom where you are the center of the action. In online courses, your role is a facilitator. In this new role, balance is essential. It is not necessary to respond to every student. In fact, doing so may overwhelm students, and “squench” their thought processes; after all, they do not need to contribute if they can always count on you to direct their thinking with elegant insights. However, you still need to maintain presence in the online discussions. Students need to know that you are active and interested in the discussion topic at hand, and you will intervene if the topic strays “off course”.

Managing your workload

Here are some ways of managing the Discussion Board workload:

- **Create an icebreaker activity the first week of the course:** Do not expect robust discussions during the first week of your online course. Give students the opportunity to learn to navigate the discussion board, and assist them if necessary. Make it clear that after the ice breaker activity; there will be regular discussion as part of their required grade. This minimizes technical excuses when you begin discussing weightier topics.
- **Commit to specific times to read the discussion board:** These are times where you will read and respond to the discussion board. Reviewing the discussion board for each new post throughout the day can be exhausting. Agree to specific windows of time where you will review and respond to student discussions. Block that time out on your calendar, and then stick to it. By committing to specific times to review discussions, you will maintain an active presence in the online course that your students will notice. In addition, specific time frames will keep you from feeling overwhelmed with the demands of the discussion board.
- **Manage student expectations:** Since you are committing to specific time frames where you will read and respond to discussions, you have the freedom to manage student expectations regarding when you will be reviewing the discussion boards, indicating that you read posts daily except for Saturdays, noting the times when you regularly check the board, etc.
- **Develop a Q&A form:** Develop a Q&A forum for your students. Set up the Q&A forum so that students can create individual threads. Offer extra credit to students for answering the questions of their peers. When students ask you a question where other classmates could benefit from your answer, have the student post the question to the Q&A forum, and provide your response to the discussion thread. If a student asks you a question that is covered in the Q&A either on the discussion board, or via email, kindly direct their attention to the appropriate Q&A thread. This minimizes the amount of redundant responses you must provide via email, or on the discussion board.
- **Anticipate their questions:** After you’ve taught an online, blended, or face-to-face course for a semester or more, you can anticipate some of the questions your students may have. You may choose to develop a Frequently Asked Questions page, and link to that within your Start Here module. You may also create announcements for specific weeks of the course that you may reuse semester after semester which answer the more anticipated questions. Thus, you do not

have to repeat the answers to these FAQs semester after semester via the discussion board, or email.

Assist students in holding a productive discussion; managing student behavior on the discussion board

Establish Netiquette Behavior: *You need clear guidelines about what is appropriate on the discussion board.* You can find advice about netiquette guidelines online using the google phrase “online classroom discussion board etiquette”, and looking at various resources.

Typically netiquette behavior addresses being polite to students of varying backgrounds, refraining from inflammatory posts, using proper grammar, and being a good steward in promoting an atmosphere of learning.

- Refer to the following link for some examples of Discussion Board Etiquette and Online Classroom etiquette that you can use:
<http://cms.montgomerycollege.edu/elite/resources/iobcs/>
- For assistance in establishing policies for your Online, Blended, or supplemental blackboard course, see the Educause article, *The Importance of Policies in E-Learning Instruction*.
<http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/EQM0433.pdf>

Provide clear standards regarding discussion board participation:

Students may be technically fluent on the discussion board, but they often have little idea about what the standards are for participating on a discussion board in a manner that enhances their classroom learning.

To assist with this, you must provide guidance as to the quality and level of posts that you expect students to make. It may help you clearly define guidelines by breaking your discussion expectations down into several component parts.

Length of message: Is message length important to you? Are there some other criteria you will use to ensure that students are not answering your discussion prompts with one sentence responses that do little to further the learning of your group?

Tone: What is the desired level of formality for students to engage with each other on the discussion board? Many instructors like the discussion board to function at an informal level, with clarity of thought and readability being the goals. Think of the discussion board in this case as functioning similar to graduate students or practitioners discussing events in your chosen field.

Required Resources: Are students to review a textbook chapter, an article, or a Films on Demand Clip, or a YouTube video? If so link to these resources, and define clear guidelines for citation of the resources. It also helps students if you help them to link the use of these

resources to your Student Learning Outcomes, in other words, how will watching the YouTube, or the video resource help them meet their student outcomes for the given week, what will they “learn” as a result of engaging with the material?

Grading Criteria: How are you going to grade student participation? One of the best ways to grade student discussion participation is to use a rubric. A grading rubric can address the length of message, tone, whether students used the required resources, grammar, and other points. An example is provided on page 3 in the *Ideas for Online and Blended course Syllabi: Sample Text* template, provided by ELITE <http://cms.montgomerycollege.edu/elite/resources/jobcs/>.

Give students guidelines to respond to peers productively

Here are some sample guidelines to choose from, which you can include in your description of discussion activities in your course syllabus:

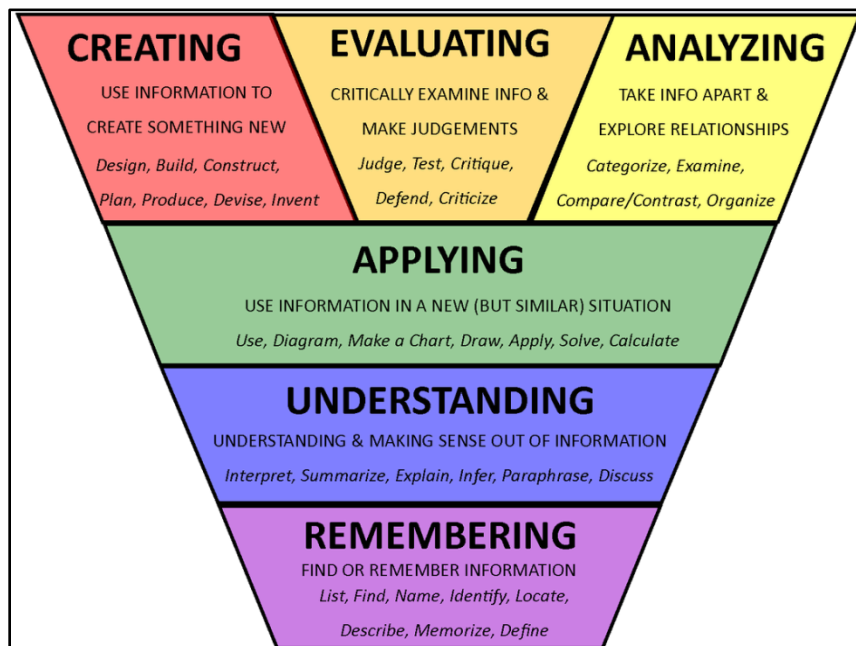
- **Participate:** We can all learn from each other. Since you may find that you learn a lot from your classmates’ posts, give them the opportunity to learn from you as well, by actively participating.
- **Be Brief:** You want others to read what you have to say, and for time on the discussion board to be time “well-spent”, so where possible, be concise with what you have to say.
- **Use your writing skills:** Use correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, and avoid “text” speak, u, 2, ☺ etc. in your responses to your peers, so that everyone reading the discussion board can understand your viewpoint.
- **Respect differences:** There are a variety of backgrounds represented in class, diversity in age, backgrounds, and ethnic makeup. Refrain from using language that is, or could be implied as, racist, sexist, or homophobic. Jokes and inflammatory language regarding these topics will not be tolerated.
- **RESIST YELLING:** Text written in all caps is taken as yelling.
- **Don’t flame others:** In the spirit of academic inquiry, critiques are expected; however, you must do so in an articulate and non-inflammatory manner. Refrain from ranting, tantrums, and name calling when giving comments to peers. Remember, advice and criticism should be constructive.
- **Pause and think before you hit submit:** For the most part, once you send a communication, you cannot take it back. While you may be able to go back and edit a posting, depending on the forum settings, when you post something it is immediately viewable by others. Thus, be sure that you can stand behind what you write, and feel comfortable with the tone. Stop and ponder for a minute or two before you hit submit to avoid sending anything rash.

You can find other guidelines that may help your students comment constructively when replying to peer posts at the following link: <http://teaching.colostate.edu/tips/tip.cfm?tipid=128>

Writing “Good” Discussion Prompts

When you are writing discussion prompts, try to isolate the most important thing you want students to know or understand about the topic (the article you assigned, the chapter in the text, the lecture in the book). All of your questions should be written with that goal in mind. Try to word your questions in such a way to avoid students being able to give a “yes” or “no” answer.

A good way to formulate discussion questions is to tie all discussion prompts back to your Learning Objectives so that your activity is meaningful to the students, and they see how the discussion will help



them with mastery of the concepts that you are teaching that week, and during the course. You should also think about the level of learning and comprehension you are trying to elicit from your students with the discussion topic.

A helpful way to think about this is reviewing this flipped model of Bloom’s Taxonomy, featured on the [Me and My Laptop Blog](#).

This model is useful because it inverts the traditional model,

where the higher level thinking skills are located at the bottom of the pyramid. Ultimately, the goal of the instructor, especially on the discussion board, is to get students to display higher level thinking skills, which is why this inverted model is a useful way of thinking about formulating online student discussion board posts. The further you move students toward the higher level thinking, the more interesting and productive your discussions will be. While there is certainly a place for the lower level thinking skills (Understanding and Remembering), there is likely a better place to engage these rote memorization skills, such as automatically scoring multiple choice quizzes, study guides, etc.

Use the models below as your guide to selecting action verbs that capture the higher level thinking skills that you want students to display on the discussion board.

Level	Definition	Sample Verbs
Create	The student is creating something new. This may involve integrating or combining an idea or process to create something that is entirely new to the student. Or it might involve proposing another solution to a pre-existing situation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create • Construct • Design • Develop • Devise • Explain • Formulate • Generate • Invent • Plan • Revise • Rewrite • Write
<p>Sample Discussion Prompt (Education Course)</p> <p>“During our recent reading about learning styles, we discussed the importance of learning styles when presenting information to students. Tailoring your lessons to reach audiences with multiple learning styles can make the material more meaningful for students.</p> <p>Create a mini lesson plan that demonstrates how you would encourage students to utilize four of the seven learning styles we discussed during the reading this week. Please post your mini lesson plan by Thursday evening at 11:59 PM, in order to give your peers adequate time to review your posts and provide comments and feedback.</p> <p>Next, review the lesson plans of two of your peers. Do you feel that they are effectively utilizing the various learning styles? Why or why not?” In order to receive credit for peer responses they must be posted to the discussion board by Sunday Evening at 11:59 PM.</p> <p>Refer to the attached rubric for the grading criteria for this Week’s Discussion. Remember to post any questions you have about this discussion board posting to the FAQ’s topic.</p>		

What makes this a good discussion prompt? The above discussion prompt references the recent reading on which the discussion will be based (the recent reading about learning styles). The student is given information about how this discussion board post is relevant to the content that they are learning for the week (this will help them learn to make material more meaningful for students). They are given clear directives for the discussion (create a mini lesson plan), along with a rubric to align expectations for the quality of discussion board postings.

Level	Definition	Sample Verbs	
Evaluate	The student is assessing, evaluating, or critiquing content on the basis of a set of criteria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appraise • Argue • Assess • Choose • Compare • Conclude • Contrast • Defend • Describe • Estimate • Evaluate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain • Judge • Justify • Interpret • Relate • Predict • Rate • Select • Summarize • Support • Value

Sample Discussion Prompt (Music Appreciation Course) by Jay Crowder- MC Music Faculty

Music is emotion transformed into sound. Music touches us EMOTIONALLY in a very personal way- no one else experiences music exactly the way that YOU do.

When you click on the discussion link, it will take you to my post where I shared a video that made a great impression upon me and I give reasons why I like the video, and the performance, in general.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT: **Choose** a song that speaks strongly to you and **give 4 reasons why**. Use my example as a template for your submission. Please post your initial response by Thursday at 11:59 PM. Post a response to one of your colleagues by Sunday at 11:59 PM.

Jay's Example Post:

I enjoy SO many types of music. I love it all. But, if I had to identify one pop song that "speaks to me" more than many others, it would be the song "Both Sides Now" written by Joni Mitchell. This song has been covered by MANY artists.

My favorite cover is by Measha Brueggergosman (who is actually a worldwide sensation as an opera singer). The elements that come together to make this so devastating to me:

- 1) the sheer beauty of the voice that does such a wonderful job conveying the emotion of the lyrics;
 - 2) the lush orchestral arrangements featuring strings and guitar;
 - 3) the slower pace of the arrangement;
 - 4) the innovative playing of the instruments and the arrangement as a whole 5) the emotional, soaring climax in the peak of the song. Here it is: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wofcmB_3oJM
- Click the link to begin our discussion of emotion and music.

What makes this a good discussion prompt? The preceding discussion prompt references the criteria for evaluation (choosing a song), and the criteria by which they are evaluating the song (provide 4

reasons why the song speaks strongly to you). The student is given a model post that demonstrates the

Level	Definition	Sample Verbs	
Analyze	The student is breaking down an object or ideas into simpler parts to find evidence to support their viewpoint.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze • Appraise • Breakdown • Calculate • Categorize • Compare • Contrast • Criticize • Diagram • Differentiate • Discriminate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinguish • Examine • Experiment • Identify • Illustrate • Infer • Model • Question • Relate • Select • Test
<p>Sample Discussion Prompt</p> <p>Your text this week focused on the three theories surrounding the way humans learn: behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism. Review this short video that explains the way that humans learn. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YOqgXjynd0.</p> <p>Compare and Contrast each of these theories. Select the theory that you believe best describes the way humans learn. Why do you believe this theory best describes the way that humans learn?</p> <p>Do you feel that integrating these various learning theories as you develop lessons would help a student, or should an instructor stick to the theory that they believe best represents the way that humans learn? Defend your answer.</p> <p>Please post your response by Thursday at 11:59 PM.</p> <p>Next, review the responses of two of your peers. Do you feel that they are accurate with their assessments of the way humans Learn? Why or why not?"</p> <p>In order to receive credit for peer responses they must be posted to the discussion board by Sunday Evening at 11:59 PM.</p>			

level of detail that the instructor is seeking.

What makes this a good discussion prompt? The preceding discussion prompt references the criteria to be analyzed (compare and contrast), and what the student is to analyze (select the theory that best describes). The student is given clear instructions on the requirements of the post (defend your answer). Next, they are given instructions on how to provide feedback to their peers (are they accurate in their assessment, why or why not)?

Level	Definition	Sample Verbs	
Applying	The student is applying their knowledge to actual situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply • Change • Choose • Compute • Demonstrate • Discover • Employ • Illustrate • Interpret • Manipulate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modify • Operate • Practice • Predict • Prepare • Produce • Relate • Show • Solve • Use • Write
<p>Sample Discussion Prompt (Computer Applications)</p> <p>You are doing consulting work for a telemarketing client who is using Microsoft Excel to store records and complete tasks where they should be using a database software package such as Microsoft Access, or Oracle. The client does not want to spend the money on an additional software package, and they are having trouble understanding why they need to use a database rather than excel for record keeping, because “excel has the rows and columns that they need”.</p> <p>Using your information in the text, or APA cited online resources; Write a memo to your client that outlines three reasons why they need to move their record keeping from excel into an Access or oracle database. Be sure to illustrate how the new system will benefit the client, along with the outcome if they continue with their current record keeping strategy. Please post your response by Thursday at 11:59 PM.</p> <p>Next, review the proposal of two of your classmates. Did they do a good job “selling” the use of proper database software to the client? Would you switch to using database software after reading this proposal? Why or why not?</p>			

What makes this a good discussion prompt? The preceding discussion prompt references how the student will apply their knowledge to an actual situation. They are directed to write a memo, and are given clear instructions on the requirement of the posting, where they are to illustrate how the new system will benefit the client and the outcome if they continue with their current record keeping strategy.

Socratic Method

Another way to develop discussion questions, or develop a discussion moderation style, is to utilize the Socratic Method. This method allows you to moderate discussions from the sidelines, functioning as a guide on the side to help your students learn. It also helps you to formulate discussion posts where there is no clear right or wrong answer, with the goal being to stimulate student thinking.

You can utilize the following Socratic techniques to moderate the discussion board

- Intervene only as necessary to clarify discussion purpose and expectation, or to minimize off topic discussion
- Compose clear communication in accordance with the discussion guidelines you identified for students, thereby serving as a best practice model
- Highlight additional perspectives that students may be overlooking.
- Enforce standards for maintaining a climate of mutual respect for students and intolerance for flaming
- Encourage the participation of students who may be reluctant to share viewpoints, or provide constructive feedback for their peers
- Provide a working summary of the discussion that is taking place between students

Developing Questions that encourage critical thought

Another important Socratic technique is asking questions that require critical thought. These are questions for which a simple, yes/no answer is impossible. It requires students to go “beyond the reading” and provide their own thinking skills and reasoning powers to engage with the material and come up with a response, or a solution. Typically these types of questions open up more avenues of discussion between students.

Emily Rosado Socratic Method Example: ENGL 190

In her ENGL 190 Intro to Literature course, Montgomery College instructor, Professor Emily Rosado has students read “The Red Convertible”, by Louise Erdrich.

In the interest of clarifying the requirements of Emily’s discussion board post, the following synopsis is provided for the reader. This synopsis would not be provided for the student, who would have read the work mentioned below.

Synopsis: “The Red Convertible” is a short story about two brothers, one of whom was drafted during the Vietnam War. When the brother who was drafted returns, he is now exhibiting symptoms of PTSD, which is not a known illness in his Native American Community.

The brothers are beginning to bond again, when one night, the Veteran walks into the lake to cool off. He starts to realize that the current is taking him away and doesn’t fight it. He ends up drowning.

Discussion question for students:

This discussion response focuses on Louise Erdrich's "The Red Convertible". Please answer the following questions in your discussion response.

- Why did Henry walk into the river?
- Was his drowning an accident or a suicide?

Discuss relevant events of the story to support your response.

Why does Emily like using this discussion question for students?

"I like this question because there are no right or wrong answers, and students can defend their opinions a number of ways using the text from the story to support their opinions."

What makes this a good discussion board post?

Since there is no clear right or wrong answer, and students need to bring their critical thinking skills to the discussion board to respond appropriately, this is a clear example of using the Socratic Technique when formulating discussion board posts.

Carrie Fitzgerald Socratic Method Example: ASTR 101

Carrie Fitzgerald is a Montgomery College Professor who teaches an entry level Astronomy course.

Here is her favorite discussion question that she uses with her students.

Discussion question for students:

It's not uncommon for some folks to confuse astronomy with astrology. Lots of people read their horoscopes and believe there's something to it. Why do you think this is? How has astrology managed to remain so popular? Is it a harmless, fun thing? Or should a belief in astrology be discouraged? Why or why not?"

Why does Carrie like using this discussion question with students?

"My goal for the forum is to be a place for the students to interact and get a chance to feel camaraderie with their peers while discussing science. To me, this is the most important aspect of using the discussion board."

What makes this a good discussion board post?




This discussion board post works well because students need to bring their critical thinking skills to the discussion board in order to answer the question about why people tend to get astrology and astronomy confused, and achieves the goal of facilitating camaraderie with student peers while learning the tools and techniques to have an enlightened conversation about an Astronomy topic.

Conclusion:

There are lots of methods that you can use to create and moderate rich discussions with your students. Hopefully these ideas have either solidified your reasons for using your current approach on the discussion board, or given you ideas for new ways to try discussions with your students.

If you have questions about developing discussions for an online, blended, or supplemental course site, contact the ELITE instructional designer on your campus for further information or support.

ELITE Instructional Designers

<p>Germantown</p> 	<p>Tom Cantu Instructional Designer Phone: 240.567.6006 Email: Tom.Cantu@montgomerycollege.edu</p>
<p>Rockville</p> 	<p>Michele Knight Instructional Designer Phone: 240.567.1733 Email: Michele.Knight@montgomerycollege.edu</p>
<p>Takoma Park</p> 	<p>Alison Yu Instructional Designer Phone: 240.567.1392 Email: alison.yu@montgomerycollege.edu</p>

Resources:

Bloom's Taxonomy Action Verbs. (2014, April 07). Retrieved 09-17-2014, from <http://www.clemson.edu/assessment/assessmentpractices/referencematerials/documents/Blooms%20Taxonomy%20Action%20Verbs.pdf>

Connor, P. (2014). Netiquette: Ground Rules for Online Discussions. Retrieved 09-18-2014, from <http://teaching.colostate.edu/tips/tip.cfm?tipid=128>

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Huitt, W. (2011). Bloom et al.'s taxonomy of the cognitive domain. *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved [09-01-14], from <http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/cognition/bloom.html>

Jepilgreenss. (2012, July 12). Simplified Blooms Taxonomy [Blog]. Retrieved from <http://www.meandmylaptop.com/my-blog/simplified-blooms-taxonomy-visual>

Trufant, L. (2003). Move Over Socrates: Online Discussion is Here. Retrieved 12-12-2013, from <https://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ncp0330.pdf>

Real MC Faculty Examples:

Jay Crowder: MUSC 136: Music Appreciation

Emily Rosado: ENGL 190: Intro to literature

Carrie Fitzgerald : ASTR 101: Astronomy