



Introduction to Discussions

Leading an effective discussion often takes greater preparation than does preparing for a lecture. Teaching by discussion can be a valuable means of helping students think critically about specific topics and apply concepts presented. Discussions can be used to engage student participation in a variety of ways:

- **Critiques** – Students can be asked to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of specific concept or give alternatives to a presented concept.
- **Class Debates** – Students can be assigned to differing sides of an issue or topic and asked to debate the issue.
- **Comparison Assignments** – Students can be asked to compare theories, authors, etc. and then allow fellow classmates to comment on their report.
- **Common Experiences** – Students can be asked to share common experiences related to the topic at hand.

Planning the Discussion

The primary goal of discussions is to promote thinking and collaboration. This can be achieved in various ways such as encouraging students to make decisions, arrive at conclusions, reflect on personal application, or resolve problems.

Planning is the key to having effective online discussions. Before posting a discussion topic, be sure to:

- Identify the learning outcomes for the exercise as well as a rubric for determining when the outcomes have been met.
- Determine key insights or ideas you wish students to leave the discussion understanding, referencing goals of the discussion assignment when applicable.
- Alert students to expectations, deadlines, etc. in your syllabus, getting started area and calendar areas when appropriate.
- Determine the topic type desired, grade points awarded and group setup as needed.

Some things to consider might be:

- How many posts per week are required for participation?
- How long should a post be?
- When are the posts due?
- What percentage of the grade will be determined by participation and/or content in the discussion?

- How would you like students to respond to one another's posts? How many should they respond to?
- How will you evaluate the quality of the posts?
- How will you enforce the rules for student behavior online?

Set the Tone

Your efforts to establish rapport with students early in the course will benefit them during online discussions. It is beneficial to begin the class with an un-graded discussion to allow students to gain confidence using the tool and becoming comfortable with their classmates.

- Using discussions consistently as part of your course design can set students at ease. List participation in discussions as a requirement in your syllabus and post reminders about ongoing discussion to keep students aware of their need to regularly check for new messages and to participate.
- Set deadlines or "closing dates" and post a wrap up posting so that there is a definitive end to the topic. Lock topics to read-only after their closing date.
- Make expectations known by stating them directly and modeling the desired behavior. Outline what is acceptable and what is not. What are the behavior expectations of students and what are the consequences when they are not followed? How much participation is enough? What is a good message length? (Note: the longer the post, the less likely it will be read.)
- Let students know how involved you will be in the discussions. Will you lead the discussions, facilitate the discussions or occasionally provide insights?
- Reinforce the behavior you want to see with public recognition.

Discussion Tool

The Discussion tool allows you, your students, and your teaching assistants to engage in a written exchange of ideas over time. Participants can read, post and respond at any time (asynchronously). As the instructor, you can organize the discussions by groups, set deadlines, lock discussions, and grade or comment directly in the tool while reading responses. The tool allows for grading of discussion topics to be set up in the grade book at the time of the discussion topic creation, as well as assigning student posting rules for each topic. It also allows for peer evaluation of posts.

The discussion tool is divided into

- **Categories** – Categories can be used to group discussion topics. Categories are optional.
- **Topics** – Topics are used to group messages. A topic may be a question or the introduction of a new concept. There are three types of topics: threaded, blog and journal.
- **Messages** – Messages are the individual posts to a specific topic.

A single category can contain multiple topics; topics can contain multiple messages.

Discussion Tools by Tab

Build – From the build tab, you can add discussion links to folders, the Home Page, and learning modules.

Build and Teach – From both the Build and Teach tabs, you can create and manage discussion categories, topics, and messages.

Teach – From the Teach tab, you can grade discussions.