

# Running a discussion board: How to ask questions that get students talking

By Wharton Interactive

Discussion boards allow students to take part in discussions online and on their own time. They are flexible and can be used in blended (a mix of face-to-face and online learning), synchronous (everyone online at the same time), or asynchronous (everyone online at different times) courses.

There are a number of benefits to integrating a discussion board in your course:

- They are inherently democratic. In a classroom, there are typically several students who dominate the conversation<sup>1</sup>. But in a discussion board, everyone has to participate – the quiet person in the back of the class has to “speak” and because status on discussion boards tends to be muted<sup>2</sup>, as compared to face to face interactions in a classroom, the quiet person’s ideas can break through.
- They extend the classroom experience. Students who answer questions on a board are answering those questions outside of the classroom. Students learn that context can influence thinking and that the outside world is connected to what they learn in the classroom.
- They allow for a deeper exploration of topics. In a fast-moving classroom discussion, some ideas get more airtime than others. In a discussion board, with some facilitation on the part of the instructor, important ideas can be explored over time.
- They can give instructors insight into what students know and think, creating an opportunity for a richer in-class discussion.
- They allow instructors and students to create “social presence” (or the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction) in an online environment. Higher levels of presence are associated with increased levels of interactivity, student perception of learning, and student satisfaction<sup>3</sup>.

Despite all the potential benefits, discussion boards can be merely performative, with students posting only the required number of posts and doing so without making a

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<sup>1</sup> Howard, J. R. (2015). Discussion in the college classroom: Getting your students engaged and participating in person and online. John Wiley & Sons.

<sup>2</sup> Swan, K., & Shea, P. (2005). The development of virtual learning communities. *Learning together online: Research on asynchronous learning networks*, 239-260

<sup>3</sup> Hewitt, J. (2005). Toward an understanding of how threads die in asynchronous computer conferences. *The journal of the learning sciences*, 14(4), 567-589

contribution that advances the discussion. The average length of a thread in a discussion board is 2.2 – that’s a single answer and a single response<sup>4</sup>. While the discussion board is not inherently interactive, instructors can set the stage for interactivity relatively easily: by **creating clear guidelines, asking good questions**, and by **moderating the discussion**.

## Creating clear guidelines

To promote collaborative dialogue, consider creating guidelines that explicitly tell students what kinds of responses and interactions you expect:

- Tell students that you are looking for timely, respectful responses that recognize and build on peer work. These rules of engagement need to be explicitly stated and may need to be reiterated during the course. If students disagree in a discussion, they need to do so respectfully and cite evidence for their argument.
- Tell students to seek out posts that have no response, to prevent clustering around popular posts.
- Tell students that you are looking for posts that:
  - offer opinions or introduce an idea (known as idea generating posts)
  - refer to previous posts and that build on ideas or agree or disagree, citing evidence (known as idea linking posts)
  - that combine ideas (known as convergence posts)<sup>5</sup>
- Grade accordingly. If you give students explicit guidelines about the kinds of contributions they should make in the discussion board, grades should reflect their work.

## Asking good questions

Questions on a discussion board should be clear, punchy, direct, and open-ended. Nothing shuts down a discussion faster than a question to which there is a simple “correct” answer. Instead, consider the following:

**Ask icebreaker questions.** Early interactions set the tone of the course and for later discussions. Studies show that students who are familiar with each other are more likely to contribute in class and on a discussion board<sup>6</sup>. Developing a sense of community,

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<sup>4</sup> Hewitt, J. (2005). Toward an understanding of how threads die in asynchronous computer conferences. *The journal of the learning sciences*, 14(4), 567-589

<sup>5</sup> Haavind, S. (2007). AN INTERPRETATIVE MODEL OF KEY HEURISTICS THAT PROMOTE COLLABORATIVE DIALOGUE AMONG ONLINE LEARNERS [1]. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 11(3).

<sup>6</sup> Swan, K., & Shea, P. (2005). The development of virtual learning communities. *Learning together online: Research on asynchronous learning networks*, 239-260

particularly in an online class in which verbal and non-verbal cues may be missing, is key. One way to help students get to know one another is an icebreaker question. Icebreakers in a discussion board can get students curious about peer answers and about the class.

- For instance, in an Astronomy course, before the course begins, you can ask students *What is the most beautiful thing you've seen in the night sky?* In class, you can display student answers. Their responses can be both a community-building exercise and can give you a chance to preview topics that will be covered.

**Make it personal.** If you are going to discuss an abstract or complicated topic, before that discussion, post a question that relates your topic to the student experience, giving students context and a way to connect course material and their experiences. Studies show that by communicating their experiences students are more likely to contribute substantively to follow up questions<sup>7</sup>.

- For instance, in a Literature course, you can ask: *In your own words, explain the concept of the unreliable narrator. What recent book or short story have you read that featured an unreliable narrator?*

**Ask students to give each other advice.** This is a question designed to help build a student community and is best suited for students sharing tips with each other about how to solve difficult problems or how to apply what they have learned. Advice giving questions can break the illusion of uniqueness (*I alone don't understand this topic*) and can surface diverse expertise among the students. Asking for advice has the added benefit of helping the advisors as well as the advisees. Studies show that those who give advice benefit from the exercise<sup>8</sup>.

- For instance, you can ask students to *Pose a question that continues to confound you or ask a question concerning a difficult concept that you would like to see explored in more detail. Once you have posted your answer, respond to at least two of your peers.*

**Ask polarizing questions.** While it's fine for students to agree, too much agreement quiets a discussion. When you ask a polarizing question in an online discussion forum, students who disagree with an earlier post are more likely to express that disagreement

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<sup>7</sup> Dennen\*, V. P. (2005). From message posting to learning dialogues: Factors affecting learner participation in asynchronous discussion. *Distance Education*, 26(1), 127-148.

<sup>8</sup> Eskreis-Winkler, L., Milkman, K. L., Gromet, D. M., & Duckworth, A. L. (2019). A large-scale field experiment shows giving advice improves academic outcomes for the advisor. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(30), 14808-14810.

than in a face-to-face classroom environment<sup>9</sup>. These disagreements often include new information or evidence and can elicit more responses.

- For instance, in a Data Ethics course, you can ask: *Google has just announced that it will release an election predictor that it claims can predict with 99 percent accuracy who is going to win the next election a year in advance. Why might it not work? If it does work, do you think they should release it?*

**Ask students to summarize the discussion.** Students tend to read a few unread posts and answer those posts, thereby missing much of the ongoing conversation<sup>10</sup>. This siloing effect isolates students from taking part in the richer discussion and as a result, their contributions may veer off-topic. To break that dynamic, you can announce that at the end of each discussion, you will pick a number of students to summarize the entire discussion *the next day*. Summarizing a discussion prompts students to monitor the entire discussion board because they may need to quickly synthesize topics and ideas. Plus, comparing two or more summaries is a good exercise in learning how to acknowledge a variety of perspectives and contributions.

- For instance, you can post this question: *In a paragraph or two, summarize the results of this discussion. In doing so, consider the trends among peer answers. For instance, you can look for popular answers or answers that garnered a lot of attention. You can also look for unusual or illuminating answers. What patterns can you spot? For reference, take a look at the way I've structured my online summary or consider how I generally wrap up a class discussion. Make sure to include specific examples of peer ideas or interactions in your summary.*

**Ask students to create memes.** A discussion board full of images is a lively discussion board. When you ask students to create a meme of a class concept, students will need to consider the most important elements of the concept and how to represent that concept to their peers. The process of filtering out and recognizing the important elements of a concept is an exercise in retrieval practice; students will have to revisit previous topics. Memes have the added benefit of creating communities by signaling belonging<sup>11</sup> — members of the class community understand what their memes mean because they have developed a collective set of ideas.

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<sup>9</sup> Chen, G., & Chiu, M. M. (2008). Online discussion processes: Effects of earlier messages' evaluations, knowledge content, social cues and personal information on later messages. *Computers & Education, 50*(3), 678-692

<sup>10</sup> Hewitt, J. (2005). Toward an understanding of how threads die in asynchronous computer conferences. *The journal of the learning sciences, 14*(4), 567-589

<sup>11</sup> McCulloch, G. (2019). *Because Internet: Understanding the new rules of language*. Riverhead Books.

- For instance, in a Psychology course, you might ask *How do we decide who to trust? Or How do we decide how much something is worth? Create a meme that answers this question. In your meme, you should make clear the specific course concept(s) you are referencing.*

## Moderating the discussion

Good question design helps but to promote substantive responses and interactivity, you should pay attention to the tone of student responses, answer visibility, and instructor presence (or how often you are “seen”).

Some tips to keep in mind:

**What came before will affect what happens next.** Much like the traditional classroom, how students feel online has to do with the present and with the past. For instance, in a discussion forum, earlier messages may affect later messages and answers and replies in earlier forums may affect later forums<sup>12</sup>. Watch for any negative social cues and intervene if students are not being respectful. One redirect from you can affect the tone of an entire discussion and discussions to come.

**Be aware of response visibility.** In a discussion board, you can control when students can view peer responses. If you allow students to view the board before posting their own answers, students will read answers before they write their own and may lock onto or be influenced by peer responses. In some cases, this can be a benefit, but in others, you may want to have students do their thinking first and then interact with others.

**Be aware of instructor presence.** Instructor presence or the degree to which the instructor is “seen” by students in an online world requires that instructors actively and consistently communicate and share their expertise<sup>13</sup>. There is a lot of advice about how much guidance students require within a discussion board, but researchers agree that some degree of instructor presence is necessary. It’s important to let students know that you are watching them – students are more likely to post substantive responses if they know that you are aware of what they post<sup>14</sup>. To create presence, you can:

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<sup>12</sup> Chen, G., & Chiu, M. M. (2008). Online discussion processes: Effects of earlier messages’ evaluations, knowledge content, social cues and personal information on later messages. *Computers & Education*, 50(3), 678-692

<sup>13</sup> Baker, C. (2010). The impact of instructor immediacy and presence for online student affective learning, cognition, and motivation. *Journal of Educators Online*, 7(1), n1.

<sup>14</sup> Dennen\*, V. P. (2005). From message posting to learning dialogues: Factors affecting learner participation in asynchronous discussion. *Distance Education*, 26(1), 127-148.

- Occasionally participate in the discussions board (but not so much that students post for you and not for each other)<sup>15</sup>
- Publicly reward a student for a contribution by noting it in the forum or mentioning it later in class
- Point out how one student's response connects to another student's response, in the forum or later in class
- Point out the differences between students responses, in the forum or later in class
- Use grades can be used to reinforce your goals

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<sup>15</sup> Dennen\*, V. P. (2005). From message posting to learning dialogues: Factors affecting learner participation in asynchronous discussion. *Distance Education*, 26(1), 127-148.

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