Engaging Students in Discussion Online

CIDR and Catalyst have worked together with UW instructors to plan and assess the use of the GoPost online threaded discussion tool in their classes. In interviews with students and consultations with instructors, we have learned that many instructors value online discussion because it encourages more students to participate and engage more deeply with course material. We have also identified key questions to help instructors take the most advantage of online discussions to promote student learning.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

What are your goals for asking students to participate in online discussion? For example:
- Prepare for in-class discussion (by posting questions for students to respond to prior to class)
- Identify key concepts in course readings
- Extend and apply issues introduced in course materials
- Continue in-class discussion outside of class time

To communicate your goals to students, you can:
- Include goals as part of the discussion board layout so that students see them when they log on.
- Post goals in a message to the board yourself.
- Put goals in the course syllabus or web site.
- Include specific goals in online discussion assignments.

If these expectations are not communicated to students, it’s possible that they won’t see the purpose of participating:

“I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be learning. A lot of postings are just post random stuff …”
(student comment)

GETTING ONLINE DISCUSSIONS STARTED

Provide guiding questions or discussion topics, based on your goals for the online discussion, to remind students:
- Why you want them to use online discussion (explore new ideas, review concepts, compare experiences …)
- What you want them to base their discussion on (readings, in-class discussion, personal opinion …)
- How you expect them to use it (when, how often, types of postings: original vs. response …)
Without your questions to guide the discussion, students may not be able to get a constructive discussion going:

“We need more guidance in the discussion. Most people (including myself) don’t know what to write about.” (student comment)

**KEEPING ONLINE DISCUSSIONS GOING**

Let students know your role in discussions. For example, will your main role be to ask questions? Actively participate? Provide summaries, in-class or online? Consider whether you want to:

- Respond to individual postings, or periodically respond to main themes in the discussion.
- Bring ideas from online discussions into class meetings.
- Ask students to provide daily or weekly summaries
- Provide examples of good and poor postings for students.
- Provide evaluative responses to student postings.

Then, make clear to students how you will participate in the discussion. For example, when will you check the board, and what kinds of responses can students expect from you?

Instructors’ ongoing input can help students see the value of the discussion, which can keep them from losing interest or wondering what they’re expected to learn in the discussion.

“I learned a lot from other students’ postings, but the professor’s involvement helped me sort out what was a valid point and what was just wrong.” (student comment)

**ASSESSING ONLINE DISCUSSIONS**

What indicators can you identify in the online discussions that will tell you what students are learning, and whether or not the discussion is accomplishing what you want it to?

What feedback can you collect from students to tell you if students think online discussions are helping them learn?

**HOW CAN CIDR HELP?**

CIDR and Catalyst have developed the EPost Teaching Guide:
http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/epost/index.html

To view a WebEd presentation on EPost user experience see:
http://depts.washington.edu/webed/presentations.html

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