Asynchronous Discussions

Many of the same principles for facilitating in-class discussions apply when creating online discussions. Below are some suggestions for translating these principles for use in online discussion forums. Online, maintaining connections and communications with students requires deliberate planning, a thoughtful structure, and most importantly, instructor engagement with the discussions.

Pedagogically

- Learning through dialogue is a powerful tool. Within discussions learners can actively synthesize new information with experiences and prior knowledge and participate in creating new knowledge. This can help them gain a deeper understanding of their own learning.
- Because students can participate on 'their own time', these discussions allow students to gather their thoughts ahead of time, overcome technical challenges related to internet interruptions, and extend conversations over time.
- Asynchronous discussions can provide opportunities for connection through images, videos, and Voice-Threads, in addition to words.
- Instructor engagement with the discussions is essential to prime student engagement. See for example, Discussion Boards: Valuable? Overused? Discuss.

Structures & strategies for using canvas discussions

Begin with an introductory forum.
- Introductions provide students the opportunity to begin to get to know each other and you. This is the beginning of a learning community. During the first week of class have students post an introduction using video or text and images to help them get to know each other and the format of your course's online discussions. Examples of things you can ask students to share:
    o personal goals for taking the course
    o strategies students plan to use to be successful in completing the course
    o something they already know about the subject or excites them about it

Use discussions to deepen student learning of key course content.
- Let students know how each discussion is integrated into the rest of the course and what they should expect to gain by participating in the activity.
- Use open-ended discussion prompts that allow students to engage with a variety of ideas and find useful information in each other's responses. To promote learning, a discussion should not be focused on finding a right answer, but instead on developing a student's ability to integrate existing knowledge and experiences, apply ideas in new contexts, or appraise information for validity and relevance.
- Example discussion activities could include: apply concepts to real examples or data, engage in debates, explore thought experiments, roll play, collaboratively approach wicked problems, learn from peers past experiences, perspectives or individual projects.

Design discussions to foster interactions.
- Encourage student-to-student interactions and provide clear instructions and incentives for students to reply to one another. Replies might engage students in tasks such as contributing supporting or opposing ideas, asking critical questions, identifying major themes, or extending ideas to new contexts.
- Consider setting multiple deadlines – one for an initial posting and a second for a reply.
- Use Groups in Canvas to have smaller student discussions. This is particularly important in larger courses, where it is recommended to group students into smaller discussion groups of about 5-15 peers.
- Be present with-in the discussion board - asking leading questions, summarizing activity, and noting insightful ideas promotes productive student engagement. Consider setting aside one to two brief times each week where you will interact with an ongoing discussion.

Provide transparent guidelines

- Set transparent expectations for participation. Provide clear directions for how, where, and when to respond. Your instructions should include expectations of a post's length and format as well as its content.
- Provide a clear explanation of how posts will be graded are critical to guide student participation. Canvas's rubric feature can help with this. Example Discussion Rubrics include:
  - Create a Discussion Rubric (University of Florida)
  - Participation Rubric Tech Tools2017.pdf (Tufts login required)
  - Rubric for Asynchronous Discussion Participation(University of Delaware)
  - Engage Students with Online Discussions (University of Minnesota)
  - Sample Discussion Board Rubric LDT.pdf (University of Delaware)

Debrief in some way

- Make connections between the ideas unfolding on the discussion board and the other class activities. For example:
  - Summarize key ideas, note questions or interesting points raised during synchronous class sessions or weekly video-check-ins with students.
  - Ask students groups to make connections to or report back ideas from discussion boards during synchronous sessions.
  - Post to the discussion board.

Technology support for canvas discussions

- Canvas@Tufts On Demand Training Library
- ETS's Class Discussions at a Distance
- Canvas Video Guides for Instructors
- ETS User Guides Canvas @ Tufts
- Find an upcoming training session
- Email canvas@tufts.edu for 1-1 support

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