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Enriching Online Classroom Discussion (2015)

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Introduction: Connecting in the Online Classroom

Consider this: as an instructor, would you enter a traditional classroom, hand out 12-14 weeks worth of assignments, readings, and other materials to students, tell them to contact you with questions, and then leave?

Your answer to this is (hopefully!) no, so why would an online course be any different? In spite of the obvious difference in format, online courses should provide the same enriching environment for students that would be expected in a traditional classroom.

To do this requires first debunking two common myths regarding students who enroll in online courses.

1. They're naturally familiar with technology, so they don't need guidance in navigating your online classroom.

Students may have used learning management systems or taken online courses before, but your course might be different from what they've experienced in the past. As their instructor, it is your responsibility—at least in part—to assist them in getting comfortable with the format.

2. They're taking an online course because they're busy, and they don't want to have to interact any more than necessary.

The reality is that students may be taking online courses for a variety of reasons, and while being "busy" might be a factor, it doesn't mean that they don't want or value interaction with their peers and instructors. Quite the opposite, in fact: as noted by educational psychologist Barbara Means in *Learning Online,* students need interaction and engagement in order to get the most out of a course, as often the flexibility afforded by online education can lead to procrastination if strong time management skills aren't employed and an instructor isn't proactive in providing assistance when necessary (2014, p. 150).

What's the Value of Online Discussion?

Online courses vary in accordance with the instructor's design and direction, just as traditional courses do. However, regardless of the overall structure and approach, discussion remains a cornerstone of academic coursework and helps to foster a collaborative spirit, as well as new ideas and perspectives for all involved. Online discussions, in some form, address three crucial needs of students in the online classroom: engagement, community, and feedback.

Engagement. The schedule and style of coursework in an online class can vary a great deal, just as it would in a traditional classroom. The difference is that, in a traditional course, students are still coming together in a physical space where the instructor has a natural opportunity to facilitate engagement between students and coursework. That natural opportunity doesn't exist online, so discussions meet this need by connecting students to the material through the online environment.

Community. Just as students who come together at a given time in a traditional class have the chance to engage with the course materials, students in a traditional situation are also automatically part of a physical community with the other students in that course. In online courses, this community must be actively facilitated by the instructor via class discussions, and when designed with critical thinking in mind (as opposed to rote answering of simple questions), the opportunity to build a community of learners is created.

Feedback. The nature of online coursework often leads students to feel that they should be able to figure things out on their own, but in reality, online students benefit more from consistent localized and global feedback on assignments, projects, and discussions. Recognizing successful students as well as those who may need additional assistance can keep students focused on the tasks at hand with minimal stress, which in turn provides a broader window of time and opportunity to participate in additional discussion.

Online discussions can take a number of forms, but they all fall into two categories: synchronous (or real-time) and asynchronous (ongoing) discussion.

Synchronous vs. Asynchronous: Which is Best?

Determining which style of online discussion is best for your course depends upon the goal of your interaction. Are you leading a brainstorming forum in which students are narrowing down topics for an essay? Is it a simple Q & A session? Is it a student-led discussion in which they interact on a project with a minimal amount of instructor participation?

Synchronous discussion occurs in real-time, and generally requires a strong internet connection as it relies often on video (or at the very least, audio) technology. Some common examples of software that supports synchronous discussion are Blackboard Collaborate, Google Hangout, or even something as simple as Skype. Synchronous discussion allows you to not only interact with your students in real-time (and for them to interact with each other), but it also gives you an opportunity to put names with faces, which can go a long way toward helping students feel like part of a classroom community. Remember that, when dealing with students from different time zones, it can be a challenge to synchronize a time that works for everyone. To that end, plan to record your synchronous session or provide supplemental resources for those who may not be able to attend due to geographic restraints.

> ## Clarity in crafting online discussions is paramount.

Asynchronous discussion occurs "offline," or typically in a threaded format that allows participants to log in and contribute at any time. Discussions of this nature usually take place within a learning management system's core features, but there are alternatives to this traditional, threaded format that can offer some exciting possibilities for extended interaction. Programs like Trello (www.trello.com), a modular flow chart designer, feature places for comments and/or discussions to be embedded in interactive projects. It's important to remember that, while not occurring in real-time, a sense of inclusion and community can be fostered in the asynchronous classroom as well - it just takes a bit more effort.

Asynchronous discussions allow for greater flexibility, but they also rely on the instructor's ability to be clear and direct with his or her expectations. For example, are students expected to answer three specific questions, or are they simply reflecting on a video or lesson? Are they leading a discussion or simply responding to their peers for some specific reason (an essay or peer review)?

Best Practices for Facilitating Online Discussion

Make it Clear.
Clarity is of particular importance in asynchronous online discussions, as students may be logging on at 4 pm or 4 am, and as an instructor, it's impossible—and not advisable—to make yourself available twenty-four hours a day. Where deadlines for participation and assignments are involved, clarity in crafting discussion questions and guidelines for response is paramount so that you don't spend undue time clarifying your expectations.

Make it Count.
As you consider what type of discussion to use in your course, it's important to remain

consistent with the goals of the discussion. It's a good idea to encourage students to participate by making some element of the discussion mandatory in order to emphasize the importance of engaging with classmates.

Make it Personal.

There is perhaps no more important element of rich online discussion than personalization. Get a sense of your students' backgrounds and career goals in an icebreaker activity early in the course, and keep a record of this information for easy reference throughout the term. It is imperative that successful online instructors possess the ability to differentiate between learning styles in course discussions and to engage students at levels appropriate to the individual, rather than employing cut-and-paste style feedback for everyone (Means, 2014, p. 143).

Make it Work.

There are many options for online discussions, so don't be afraid to tinker with the format. Students will appreciate a responsive system more than they will appreciate dedication to a single but ineffective method. For example, Google Apps support discussion in a variety of ways, from Google Hangout to Google Groups to course announcements in Google Classroom. What works for one discussion or course might not be the best option for another, so explore the possibilities.

Make it Enriching.

As an online instructor, successful student guidance relies on the same kinds of encouragement, constructive criticism, and insight that you would employ in the traditional classroom. Students notice when online instructors participate and offer their own unique and valuable feedback, so enrich the discussion whenever you can.

Conclusion

Interaction in online courses isn't just about the nuts-and-bolts of the technology involved: it's rooted in the psychology of how we learn and what makes an enriching learning environment. Successful discussions should allow for deep faculty-student and student-student engagement so that everyone feels comfortable connecting as they would in a traditional classroom.

About the Author

Having developed and taught online courses since 2007, Christopher Bevard is currently the Assistant Director for Educational Technology at The John Marshall Law School in Chicago, Illinois, where he oversees development and delivery of JMLS' extensive eCourses program, in addition to teaching traditional and online Composition and Humanities courses for several institutions. To download a PDF version of this and other white papers, visit sites.google.com/site/bevardedtech.

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