Guidelines for Effective Discussions

This set of guidelines has been designed for you if you are teaching online or if you just want to want to use Discussion Boards to enhance your traditional classroom-based course.

There are several advantages to using the Discussion Boards in Blackboard:

1. *Greater student participation*, especially if students are graded for their efforts.
2. *Greater diversity of opinions* and ideas are shared because all students are participating including the shy students and non-native English speakers.
3. *More thoughtful responses* because students are given more time to process the question(s) and formulate their responses.
4. More opportunities for students to *hone their writing skills*, particularly in writing clear and concise responses. (This is a discussion, not an essay or a term paper.)
5. *A deeper understanding of the subject matter* (hopefully) through interactions with you and peers.

In order to maximize these advantages though, you will need to formalize the process of participation for your students. We want to ensure that your students will know what to expect from you, what you expect of them, and what they can expect from one another in terms of having lively, meaningful, and respectful discussions.

EFFECTIVE DISCUSSION PROMPTS

For peer-to-peer discussion, effective discussion prompts ask students to exercise higher-order thinking skills (HOTS): Compare and contrast, diagnose, etc. The goal is to go beyond simple responses that focus on a single, correct answer.

Steer clear of close-ended questions (e.g. Yes/No) and broad open-ended questions like "What do you think?" Use Bloom's Taxonomy to help you create questions.

Figure 1: http://www.mlevel.com/applying-blooms-taxonomy-in-corporate-elearning/

FORUM PARTICIPATION GUIDELINES

Guidelines are as much for your students as they are for you. Without them, participation may be non-existence or you may encounter lackluster responses such as "I agree with X." Guidelines will also help you set boundaries with respect to your time, which is important, because well-run discussion boards can be very active and time-consuming.

The questions below will help you to develop your guidelines:

How much are forum posts worth?

Remind students how participation factors into their grade for the course.
Tell students the total number of posts required for the semester.

What must students do to receive full credit?

For quality responses:
- Respond by deadline.
- Respond to X# classmate(s) by another deadline.
- Adhere to online discussion rubric criteria.
- No "I agree," etc.

For language and style:
- Spell check, grammar check.
- Write in complete sentences.
- Organize thoughts clearly.
- Minimum and maximum number or words.

For etiquette:
- Posts should be respectful and thought-provoking, not antagonistic. (You reserve the right to remove inappropriate posts and take necessary action.)
- Anonymity of organizations, colleagues, and clients must be protected when citing personal experience.

How will you participate in the discussion forums?

Your role in the Discussion Boards is not unlike your role in the classroom. You lead, you guide, you prompt. But given that these discussions are not happening in real-time, you will also need to address the following:
1. How often will you check student postings?
2. How frequently will you respond?
3. Will you provide a summary at the end of each week in-class or online?

While you may want to respond to each student's discussion post(s), this can become overwhelming and exhausting. To reduce this load, you can address multiple students (who have similar ideas) in one post. You should also set a schedule for when you will respond and let students know this upfront.

How are forums run?

Don't assume students know how to participate in the Discussion Boards. In a few sentences, explain the general structure.

Example
Every other week, you will visit the Weekly Folders in Blackboard. Review the materials and then click on the Discussion Board link. Review the question, formulate a response, and click "Create Thread" to add your post. Then, click "Reply" to comment on at least X number of your peers' posts.

Example
Discussion forums will open every other week on X day and close on Y day. The deadline for initial posts is X day/time EST, and deadlines for commenting on your peers' contributions are Y day/time EST.

Create a consistent structure for all discussion forums and include this information in a few areas in Blackboard such as Announcements, Course Materials, Syllabus, etc.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Well-designed Discussion Forums can lead to active participation by your students. To reduce your workload (e.g. reading and responding to posts) and retain your students' interests, it's best to vary the activities. Intersperse online discussions with other activities just as blogging, journaling, or group projects.

DISCUSSION BOARD HELP

If you would like to learn how to use the Discussion Boards in Blackboard, you can review written instructions on the Faculty BB Resources Page.

If you have questions about facilitating discussions, please contact our Educational Technologist, Deepa Rao-Sisario (dr1649@hunter.cuny.edu).