

# **“WHAT IS NOT TO DISCUSS?” – BEST PRACTICES FOR USING DISCUSSIONS IN ONLINE PEDAGOGY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Online group discussions are an integral part of ensuring and assessing group work in online classes. The authors with a combined experience of 12 years teaching online courses discuss the pedagogy of using discussions in such classes. While online discussions can also be an excellent ancillary activity for face to face classes, they can also pose significant challenges. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the best practices in leveraging the value of online discussions. Several practical considerations and potentially helpful strategies in online discussions are presented. The paper also identifies questions that merit further study.*

## **KEYWORDS**

Online classes, Discussion, Course Design

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Rapid and ongoing changes in technology over the last decade have significantly impacted higher education [1]. Such changes began with the explosion of the internet. With the widespread availability of laptops, smart phones, and cloud computing, many universities have developed alternative modes of pedagogy. Certainly, there is still widespread emphasis on the traditional face-to-face format for delivery of courses and programs.

However, technology allows alternatives ranging from technology-enhanced traditional courses to hybrid courses to individual courses that are completely online to fully online programs and degrees. Online enrollments in the United States have continued to increase in the last decade, from 9.6% of total enrollment in the Fall of 2002 to 31.3% in 2011. Additionally, in 2011 more than 6.1 million students took at least one online course - an increase of 560,000 from the previous year (Allen & Seam[2], [3]. Particularly in the United States, the impact of the economy has led to increased demand for face-to-face and online course offerings, with the increase in demand for online courses being greater than the demand for face to face classes – with no evidence that the robust growth is ending [2].

Using technology to deliver instruction can have significant practical and pedagogical advantages. One important practical advantage is that it eliminates the constraints of fixed physical resources. A physical classroom may hold 50 students; a virtual classroom could potentially ‘hold’ an unlimited number of students. Obviously, a university’s online offerings could potentially attract student enrollment from anywhere in the world. Strategic use of technology in higher education can also have significant pedagogical

advantages. The mere use of technology allows students to hone their technological skills, which is an important advantage in today's world [4]. Also, students value the 'time and place' flexibility that online courses offer, with perceived flexibility being a major factor in the choice of online classes [5]. Course support software such as Desire to Learn (D2L) may also allow faculty to more easily document both the process and the products of learning.

One of the biggest potential benefits of online pedagogy is the ability to engage students in meaningful discussions about course-specific topics. Indeed, the heart and soul of many online offerings is discussion. Online discussions can also be a valuable activity in traditional face-to-face courses. It can be logistically difficult or impossible to have meaningful in-class discussions, depending on the number of students and the amount of time available, so online discussions can be an excellent ancillary activity. However, online discussions can also be one of the biggest challenges for both instructors and for students. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the best practices in leveraging the value of online discussions, and to identify questions that merit further study.

## **2 WHAT TO DISCUSS?**

Perhaps the most important question to ask in the context of any online discussion is what topics are appropriate for discussion. Clearly, the answer to this depends a great deal on the nature of the course in question. In our experience, yes/no and right/wrong topics do not result in meaningful

discussion experiences for students. Students may be hesitant to post, hoping that the proverbial sacrificial lamb will post first, and then respond with 'oh, yes! That's what I was going to say about that statistics problem, too!'

The richest discussion experiences typically focus on posts that involve either opinions or personal experiences. In a junior-level Human Resource Management course, one important topic covers performance management and the disciplinary process. Students are provided with some detailed content, either via lecture or electronically. The discussion activity requires each student to post a description of the strangest thing they have ever seen or heard someone to while at work and what action, if any, a manager took. Each student is also required to reply to at least one other student's original post. The instructor then provides students with a summary of the types of incidents mentioned and the range of management responses.

Another example of an excellent discussion activity involves an advanced course in Compensation and Benefits. One important topic in this course is the evolving nature of healthcare in the United States. Students are provided with several articles about healthcare issues, including the impact of lifestyle choices on healthcare costs. They then participate in an online discussion about whether consumers should pay more for healthcare due to factors such as obesity, smoking, inactivity, etc. Inevitably, there are comments along the lines of 'well, who defines obesity, anyway?' The instructor then provides a link to the Centers for Disease Control website, which allows students to review how the

medical community officially defines obesity. (Students are not expected to post any information about their own personal health.)

In yet another example which involves an Operations Management class, the instructor uses the book “The Goal” as an additional reading to a regular Operations Management textbook. “The Goal” which has 40 chapters, requires an online discussion format. The book that follows a novel-type format, brings out the “Theory of Constraints” through the story of how a manager turns around his company. Students are expected to read a set of specified chapters every week and discuss what they glean from those chapters, relate them to real life or apply to examples at their work. The discussions can then be quite vivid and meaningful. It also takes away from repetitive points being made, since every student’s work experience would be different.

As noted above, the choice of appropriate, meaningful discussion assignments is very course-specific. In our experience, personal opinion and/or personal experience activities are most valuable. It is also important to provide students with some context for such discussion activities. For example, in the aforementioned Human Resource Management course, it would be pointless to ask students to discuss the concept of fair employment practices unless they are provided with some substantive information about the history of discrimination in the United States and the nature of the fair employment system.

### **3 PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In our experience, a number of practical considerations can significantly affect the value of online discussions. One such consideration is the short-term and long-term timing of discussions. Discussions may be synchronous, meaning that all enrolled students and the instructor participate at the same time, during a pre-determined window. This may help ensure that there is class-wide discussion, but it may compromise the flexible nature of online activities, which is of major importance for many students. As mentioned earlier, flexibility is one of the major factors in students choosing online classes. In asynchronous discussions, students are free to post at their convenience. However, to avoid the possibility of online activities essentially turning courses into the old-style correspondence courses, we have found that setting parameters is very important. In a traditional fully online course that runs for a standard semester, students might be required to post their own original comment by Tuesday at midnight, & then reply to at least one other comment by Friday at midnight. This keeps the class moving in the content and discussion topics while ensuring adequate flexibility for the student. A sample calendar for a compressed course taught this summer is on Table 1.

**Table 1: Sample calendar format for discussions**

Summer 2013 Calendar

Deadlines for “THE GOAL” Discussions and Group Assignments

Week/ Lesson(s)	Item and Description	Due by	Date Due 2013
Lesson 1	Introductory Activity		Tues May 21
5/20-5/24 Lessons 2 & 3	Chapters 1-6 (The Goal) Discussion Initial Post. Use the Lesson 3 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 2 & 3 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Wed May 22
	Chapters 1-6 (The Goal) Discussion Follow-Up Post. Use the Lesson 3 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 2 & 3 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Fri May 24
	Lesson 2 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 1)	11:59 PM	Wed May 22
	Lesson 3 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 2)	11:59 PM	Fri May 24
5/25-5/29 Lessons 4 & 5	Chapters 7-12 (The Goal) Discussion Initial Post Use the Lesson 5 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 4 & 5 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Tues May 28
	Chapters 7-12 (The Goal) Discussion Follow-Up Post Use the Lesson 5 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 4 & 5 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Wed May 29
	Lesson 4 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 3)	11:59 PM	Tues May 28
	Lesson 5 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 4)	11:59 PM	Wed May 29
5/29-5/30	Quiz 1	Opens 9:00 AM Wed May 29	Closes 11:59 PM Thurs May 30
5/31-6/2 Lessons 6 & 7	Chapters 13-18 (The Goal) Discussion Initial Post. Use the Lesson 7 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 6 & 7 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Fri May 31
	Chapters 13-18 (The Goal) Discussion Follow-Up Post Use the Lesson 7 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 6 & 7 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Sun June 2
	Lesson 6 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 5)	11:59 PM	Fri May 31
	Lesson 7 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 6)	11:59 PM	Sun June 2

6/3-6/6 Lessons 8 & 9	Chapters 19-24 (The Goal) Discussion Initial Post Use the Lesson 9 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 8 & 9 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Tues June 4
	Chapters 19-24 (The Goal) Discussion Follow-Up Post Use the Lesson 9 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 8 & 9 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Thurs June 6
	Lesson 8 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 7)	11:59 PM	Tues June 4
	Lesson 9 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 8)	11:59 PM	Thurs June 6
6/6-6/7	Quiz 2	Opens 9:00 AM Thurs June 6	Closes 11:59 PM Fri June 7
6/8-6/10 Lessons 10 & 11	Chapters 25-30 (The Goal) Discussion Initial Post Use the Lesson 11 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 10 & 11 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Sat June 8
	Chapters 25-30 (The Goal) Discussion Follow-Up Post Use the Lesson 11 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 10 & 11 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Mon June 10
	Lesson 10 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 9)	11:59 PM	Sat June 8
	Lesson 11 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 12)	11:59 PM	Mon June 10
6/11-6/14 Lessons 12, 13, & 14	Chapters 31-40 (The Goal) Discussion Initial Post Use the Lesson 14 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 12, 13, & 14 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Wed June 12
	Chapters 31-40 (The Goal) Discussion Follow-Up Post Use the Lesson 14 Discussion area for your post. (This is a combined post for Lessons 12, 13 & 14 Discussions.)	11:59 PM	Fri June 14
	Lesson 12 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 15)	11:59 PM	Wed June 12
	Lesson 13 Group Assignment (Text Chapter 16)	11:59 PM	Fri June 14
6/13-6/14	Quiz 3	Opens 9:00 AM Thurs June 13	Closes 11:59 PM Fri June 14

Another potentially helpful strategy with respect to timing is ‘hiding’ the availability of discussion topics to

essentially require students to participate within a specific window. In our extensive online experience, we've had some students who enroll and then rush through every discussion topic during the first several weeks. We've had other students who 'participate' after the fact. Neither extreme is helpful for students to benefit from the value of an active discussion.

A major challenge for both students and instructors is keeping up with discussion activity. Depending on the number of students enrolled, the volume of discussion postings can quickly become overwhelming. One solution would be to limit the number of students enrolled, particularly in fully online courses. Our somewhat anecdotal experience suggests limiting enrollment in such courses to a maximum of 20 students or so. Effective online instruction requires a great deal of feedback to individual students, and it is very difficult to deliver such feedback with large numbers of students. However, since online courses often include a technology fee, in addition to the standard tuition fee, administrators are understandably reluctant to cap enrollment. In large sections, instructors may want to consider placing the students into groups for discussion purposes. This allows students to keep up with posts only from their group members, rather than trying to sift through potentially hundreds of posts from an entire class.

It is critical for instructors to provide some parameters as far as expectations for discussion activities. For example, an instructor should indicate how often he/she will check in to a course website – example, “discussions or emails will be responded to, within 24 hours”. Will

the instructor respond to any or all discussion posts? (Note: in our experience, it is important to personalize responses to students. In fully online courses in particular, students appreciate replies which include the student's first name. Instead of just replying, we reply with 'Joe, that's a good point, and . . .') Should students be expected to use appropriate grammar and spelling? What repercussions, will be taken in the event of a student posting inappropriate or offensive content? There is no one size fits all set of rules, but these are important questions to ask in the design of any online discussion activity.

#### **4 ASSESSMENT**

Perhaps the most challenging part of online discussion is assessment. Most course support software such as D2L allows an instructor to use a 'search' feature to monitor the number of posts from individual students. Even something as seemingly objective as the overall number of posts can be rife with judgment, however. 'One original post and only one reply to another post means "One original post and 25 replies to other posts" for the instructor. As noted above, in large sections, the number of posts can quickly become overwhelming, so some instructors deduct points for too many posts. Other instructors prefer not to quash lively discussion. And obviously, in addition to quantity, it is important to provide some rubric for quality. Clearly, there is a difference between a detailed opinion which includes references, links or real life applications, and a reply such as 'I agree,' or 'good point.'

Examples of some rubrics that can be helpful are

'8 points per week for 1 original post by wed and 1 reply post by Fri, 9 points for 1 original post and 2 replies' and 10 points for two posts and two replies – provided they are contributing to the discussion. No "I agree" posts'

We also recommend pegging results to both quantity of postings & quality. Students themselves could evaluate the contributions of other students' discussions: not necessarily in a way that affects grades, but more in 'whose contributions consistently added the most to my learning experience.' Or 'how did this discussion forum help me understand the topic.' For example, one author has Human Resource students discuss Affirmative Action. Many of them start out with a very naïve idea of AA, & they seem to get a much better sense of it when they discuss it with a diverse group of fellow students. In another course, they are expected to discuss the notion of whether healthcare is a right or a privilege. That takes us into researching things like the definition of obesity & the potential implications of personal responsibility for one's health. So performance results could potentially be a pre-test on what they know about the healthcare system, followed by the discussion activity, guidance to things like CDC (Centers for Disease Control) links, links to several articles about healthcare issues, & then a post-test to see if there is an improvement in their knowledge.

Discussions could also be evaluated on things like incorporating references/links to real-world information. Some of the most valuable discussion postings involve (a) taking the MBTI (or IQ), & discussing their impressions. And then some students -- even though it is not

required -- will find & post articles from decent sources (like the Wall Street Journal) that review the nature & value of standardized testing.

Another point to keep in mind is the extent to which the instructor should be involved. Instructors cannot reply to all discussion postings, especially in a sizable section, but they should reserve the right to hop in, particularly when a discussion is veering off-topic, or if a student is posting inappropriate material.

Some students want to know in detail why they did not get the full points. It is good practice in the beginning of the semester, to include in the syllabus: Points for posts are awarded based on relevance to chapter, application in real life etc. This can ensure that students post original thoughts and do not copy and paste from others. Similarly including a rubric or extra credit that gives more points for 'a post that generates the most discussion', can be helpful and it helps students compete for originality and engagement.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The use of technology in higher education is clearly here to stay [6]. Online discussions, whether as part of a fully online course or as an ancillary activity in a traditional face-to-face course, have the potential to provide a rich, meaningful pedagogical experience for students. The ultimate value of such discussions depends on thought and careful planning on the part of an instructor. Further research can focus on setting rubrics for discussions, surveys that assess discussion specifically and detailed assessment of discussion. We hope this article helps colleagues that are

particularly entering the online teaching format and are in the process of designing online courses.

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