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Engaging Students in Discussion Board Forums and Encouraging TCE Participation

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The Challenge with LMSs

Canvas and other LMSs are good at administering courses.

They are not always great at providing learning places.

The Solution

Be aware of the limitations of discussion forums.

Match the work/activity of the discussion forum to the content/topic of the course.

Choose other tools when appropriate.

Go to the literature https://eric.ed.gov/ and catch up on online learning research

Consider the various learning theories and apply one (see: Hoy, 2002)

Theoretical / Research Guidance

What does learning mean?

How can this inform creating discussion forums as a place for learning?

How can I make discussion forums student-centered?

Learning (broadly, a constructivist approach):

Is an active process.

For discussion forums:

- How does this activity encourage engagement and with others?
- How does this activity help students build and apply mental models?
- How does this activity help students draw connections between ideas?

Learning (broadly, a constructivist approach):

"Builds on prior knowledge"

For discussion forums:

- How am I referencing prior information/knowledge?
- How am I challenging prior information/knowledge?
- How am I applying scaffolding techniques so that students can build on prior information/knowledge throughout the course?

Learning (broadly, a constructivist approach):

"Occurs in a complex social environment"

For discussion forums:

- How am I creating community? (Or, perhaps, congressive activities?)
  - Collaboration, Community, Interdependence
- How am I using community to foster the learning process?
- What social contexts am I referencing or establishing or situating students in?

Learning (broadly, a constructivist approach):

"Is situated in an authentic context"

For discussion forums:

- What kind of context am I creating and why is it relevant/important?
- How well do student activities match course content?
- How am I keeping students on topic?
- How am I introducing content only when students are ready for it or want it?

Learning (broadly, a constructivist approach):

Requires motivation and "cognitive engagement" (UC Berkeley)

For discussion forums:

- How am I helping students build motivation?
- How am I helping students build:
  - Awareness/Attention
  - Understanding
  - Reasoning
  - Memory

Motivation ⇒ Student Participation

Motivation may take time for students to develop.

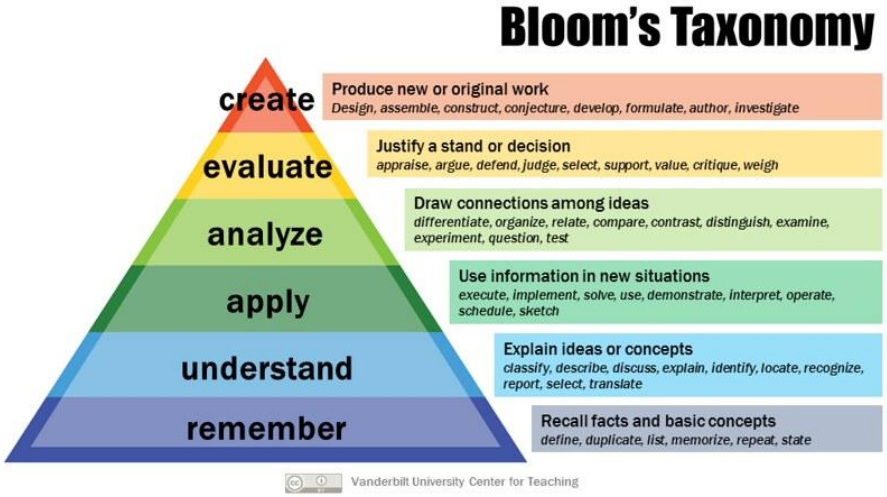
Instructors may need to be very active in kick starting conversations or engagement in activities at the beginning of the semester.

Students will become more confident and proactive as the course progresses.

Motivation ⇒ Student Participation

Motivation is aided when discussion prompts prompt discussion, relate theory to practice or everyday life, and are not close-ended or simple.

Sophisticated discussion questions (cf. to Bloom's taxonomy) promote participation and learning.



Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/vandycft/29428436431

Motivation ⇒ Student Participation

Rubrics can be used to assess discussion board posts.

If used well, they can promote participation and creativity, resolve ambiguities, highlight expectations.

They need to be clear, encouraging, and not punitive but highlight a path to learning.

Elements of Discussion Board Rubrics

Rubrics are helpful when they assess (Ringler et al., 2015):

- Interactions (or collaboration)
- Content
- Engagement
- Tone
- Mechanics
- Quality over quantity

Instructors ⇒ Student Participation

Instructors have certain strategies available to them that can promote participation and learning (Ringler et al., 2015):

- Be active (but not over the top)
- Identify areas of agreement and disagreement
- Highlight areas of consensus
- Acknowledge contributions
- Identify what works and what doesn't, and revise strategy based on this
- Send personal emails to low participating students (also, student alerts if necessary)

Instructors ⇒ Student Participation

Conduct a mid-semester course evaluation to seek anonymous student feedback.

- I use Google Forms with about 8 or so questions that are related to learning outcomes and course delivery and a couple of open ended questions asking how things (me, the course, etc) could be improved or what content needs more attention
- Goal is to identify confusing elements of the course as well as to learn what has been helpful or could be more helpful
- I summarize the feedback for the students and, if warranted, let them know how I will alter my own behaviors, communication issues, etc. Transparency helps (esp. with graduate and non-traditional students).

Preparing Students: The Syllabus

- Have a discussion forum dedicated to discussing the parts of the syllabus
- Identify how the syllabus (or course) is influenced by a theory of learning, instructor expectations, assessment methods used, etc.
- Require students to ask a question about the syllabus (Kerrigan, 2018)

Preparing Students: Course Orientation

- Create a screencast, navigate the course shell and discuss the various parts.
- Be explicit about the course and how it works. Riggs & Linder (2016) suggest answering the following kinds of questions:
  - ❏ How do students participate?
  - ❏ How much should they participate?
  - ❏ How does discussion board work (and other tools used)?
  - ❏ How are discussions assessed?
  - ❏ Where do students go to for updates about the course?
  - ❏ And more.

Creating Community

- Start off with an ungraded discussion forum dedicated to everyone introducing themselves. Start with yourself.
- Create a General Comments/Questions/Feedback forum
- Consider using alternative tech to promote social engagement and community, like Microsoft Teams. If class is asynchronous, consider having a couple of socials on Zoom

Course Architecture

Use modules. Modules help students see the course architecture and the main ideas of a course (Riggs & Linder, 2016):

- Provide **milestones**
- Prevent students from feeling overwhelmed
- Are visually appealing (in Canvas)
- Provide a mechanism for **scaffolding**

Know When to Abandon Canvas (or any LMS)

By default, LMS tools promote passive learning and instructor-centered pedagogy. Instructors have to work hard to overcome the default assumptions built into Canvas and other LMSs. Use outside tech (plus if mobile friendly).
See presentations by Drs. Kaufmann, Vallade, and Greenhalgh for specific EdTech examples. Other examples:

- Microsoft Teams (university account) or Slack
- WordPress blogging or Google Sites
- GitHub for technology courses
- YouTube videos

Discussion Forum: Prompt Post

- Lecture: video, audio plus transcript
  - Add interactivity (e.g., YuJa prompts) and limit to 15 minutes maximum length (Geri et al., 2017) but lectures may be optimized when chunked at six minutes (Guo et al., 2014 [see limitations in their paper]). Mine are usually about 15 minutes.
  - If online video lectures are longer:
    - Add interactivity
    - Place important points up front
- Demo videos (expert observation). Example:
  - I teach a lot of tech, and so I capture my use of these technologies in demo/tutorial videos
  - If course is based on readings, I might interact with the readings and show how to read academic literature

Lecture Videos (Ghou et al., 2014)

Finding	Recommendation
Shorter videos are much more engaging.	Invest heavily in pre-production lesson planning to segment videos into chunks shorter than 6 minutes.
Videos that intersperse an instructor's talking head with slides are more engaging than slides alone.	Invest in post-production editing to display the instructor's head at opportune times in the video.
Videos produced with a more personal feel could be more engaging than high-fidelity studio recordings.	Try filming in an informal setting; it might not be necessary to invest in big-budget studio productions.
Khan-style tablet drawing tutorials are more engaging than PowerPoint slides or code screencasts.	Introduce motion and continuous visual flow into tutorials, along with extemporaneous speaking.
Even high quality pre-recorded classroom lectures are not as engaging when chopped up for a MOOC.	If instructors insist on recording classroom lectures, they should still plan with the MOOC format in mind.
Videos where instructors speak fairly fast and with high enthusiasm are more engaging.	Coach instructors to bring out their enthusiasm and reassure that they do not need to purposely slow down.
Students engage differently with lecture and tutorial videos	For lectures, focus more on the first-watch experience; for tutorials, add support for rewatching and skimming.

Table 1. Summary of the main findings and video production recommendations that we present in this paper.

Discussion Forum: Prompt Post

- Include links to readings, if relevant
- Include links to lecture transcripts, if provided (YuJa provides some captioning abilities)
- Include description of tasks, if relevant, or discussion prompts
- If not including a video lecture, consider including a short video that explains the goal of the forum. Do this for assignments, too.

Discussion Forum: Learning Strategies

Don't rely on basic Q&A activities. Some options:

- Assign roles. Ex: half the class responds to the initial prompt but then the other half responds to those students.
- Go beyond text. Ex: have students take pictures that are relevant to the topic and share and discuss them. Or create concept maps and discuss them. Etc.
- Drop discussions, do assignments in the forums. Ex: have students create and post concept maps that draw connections between ideas taught in the course.

Discussion Forum: Learning Strategies

Options (cont):

- Group projects
- Students lead discussions and give presentations (with instructor responses)
- Observational learning. Ex: demo videos
- Play Games: Librarians turned Google Forms into the unlikely platform for virtual escape rooms
- Problem based learning: Cornell Center for Teaching Innovation
    - See also, Anchored instruction

Discussion Forum: Learning Strategies

If applying straightforward discussion exercises, use a discussion framework such as **3CQ**, where responses must include a:

- Compliment
- Comment
- Connection
- Question (Lieberman, 2019)

Discussion Forum: Learning Strategies

Take breaks:

- Don't do discussion forums every week (regardless of the type of activity). Maybe have 13 discussion forums in a 15 week semester.
- Alternatively, let students have two freebies of their choice.

Practical Gotchas

- Check that your forums are published.
- Subscribe to your forums.
- Activate threaded discussions.

Other Tips

- May need constraints. Ex: if students post too much.
- Respond to emails quickly, but
- Establish your boundaries
- Consider your audience (undergraduate / graduate; first year / last year) because this influences how students participate and what kinds of strategies you need to employ

TCEs

- I usually get around 80% response rate or higher in my online courses.
- I do this by emailing the students every day or every other day. If I don't do this, then I don't ever come close to an 80% response rate.
- I check evaluate.uky.edu/Blue for response rates and let students know what the current rate is, and I ask them to beat it.

Initial Email for TCEs

Hi Class,

You should have received emails notifying you that Teacher Course Evaluations are ready to be completed.

Please complete these evaluations. Your feedback matters to me because I use it to improve the course. It would be great if at least ~80% (19 students) could complete the TCEs because that would give me a more complete picture of your collective feedback, but of course, all of your voices matter, and so 24 out of 24 would be ideal.

Your comments are anonymous.

I added a link to the Teacher Course Evaluations in the left menu of Canvas for this course. This way you don't have to go find that email from TCE.

Alternatively, you may follow these instructions:

Follow Up Emails

Hi Class,

We have reached a 50% response rate for TCEs. We still need 5 more responses to reach an 80% response rate. Remember, your voice is important and I do use your feedback to improve the course.

Five more to go!

Dr. Burns

Final Email

Hi Class,

We've hit an 82% response rate on the TCEs. Thank you very much! The more feedback you all provide, the more confident I can be in the results.

If you would still like to complete the TCEs and haven't, please go ahead! Your comments are important, and I would like to hear back from all of you.

Dr. Burns

Questions, Discussion?

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